Brinksmanship in the Kargil Heights: A Study of Escalation and Restraint During the 1999 Kargil Conflict

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Table of Contents

1. Introduction

The 1999 Kargil conflict was India and Pakistan's fourth war, and their third fought over the disputed territory of Kashmir (the former 'princely state' of Jammu and Kashmir), a dispute that has its roots in partition. The conflict took place in the immediate aftermath of nuclear tests by both countries in 1998, which marked the end of around a decade of 'opaque' nuclear deterrence between the two.[1] Indeed, the Kargil conflict is remarkable for being one of only two direct, conventional wars ever fought between nuclear weapons states, the other one being the 1969 Sino-Soviet border conflict.

The war was fought from May to July 1999 across a particularly remote section of the Line of Control (LoC) separating Indian-controlled Kashmir and Pakistani-controlled Kashmir; the LoC serves as a *de facto* (but emphatically not a *de jure*) border between the two countries. Pakistani forces, posing as Kashmiri *mujahideen* and wearing civilian clothes, crossed the LoC over the winter of 1998-9, taking advantage of the fact that it was customary for both sides to leave their observation posts over winter because of the extreme weather conditions. Pakistani forces 'cheated the tradition' and took over unmanned posts on the Indian side of the LoC, even as prime ministers Vajpayee and Nawaz (of India and Pakistan respectively) engaged in promising bilateral diplomatic talks at the Lahore summit in February.

Pakistani troops were first discovered on 3rd May when two local shepherds reported seeing armed civilians. The initial Indian efforts to oust the intruders were met with high casualties, and it was not until mid-May that evidence accumulated indicating the intruders were Pakistani soldiers. With the scope of the incursion becoming evident, India mobilised significant reinforcements and called in more firepower (including batteries of Bofors 155mm howitzers that played a key role) and even introduced airpower into the conflict on 24th May; the first combat the Indian Air Force (IAF) had seen since the 1971 war. However, despite ample opportunity to escalate both horizontally (meaning geographical expansion) and vertically (meaning the introduction of new weapons), India acted with restraint and kept its operations to its side of the LoC.

As the war continued into June, it was far from clear whether India would evict the intruders before winter. By 20th June, however, the tide had turned decisively in India's favour, and, as the international community lined up to condemn Pakistan's incursion, Nawaz began to look

[1] See for example Basrur, "Two Decades of Minimum Deterrence" for discussion of how long two the two sides operated under opaque deterrence.

for a way out. As besieged Pakistani posts began to fall, without reinforcements and unsupported by airpower (in a notable show of restraint by Pakistan), Nawaz came to Washington to meet Bill Clinton on the 4th of July. Clinton firmly told him to withdraw back behind the LoC, and made no concessions other than a promise to take a 'personal interest' in restoring India-Pakistan dialogue. The Clinton meeting effectively ended the conflict, although hostilities did not cease immediately; it was not until the 26th July that the Indian military declared the LoC restored.[2]

1.1 The Kargil Conflict: A Rorschach Test for Deterrence Theorists?

The Kargil conflict has generated a voluminous literature covering the nuclear aspect of the conflict; this would be a surprising feature of such a small war were it not for the conflict's nearly unique status as a test case for propositions within nuclear deterrence theory. However, perhaps the most notable feature of this literature is the extremely diverse set of interpretations as to what the conflict proves; a recent quantitative paper evaluating support for an important theoretical proposition in this literature (the stability/instability paradox) remarked with some surprise that 'Researchers have arrived at conflicting conclusions with respect to the stability–instability paradox even when looking at the same case.'[3] The case in question, of course, was the Kargil conflict.

At the risk of adding to this imbroglio, this paper aims to contribute to resolving a key controversy: why the Kargil conflict did not escalate into a full-scale war. This paper follows Richard Smoke's seminal work on escalation in making the key assumption that 'war by its nature favors escalation … Escalation is not a mere possibility—something that may happen or may not, like a rainstorm over the battlefield. It is an ever-present "pressure" or temptation or likelihood.'[4] How this pressure was resisted is the key focus of what follows.

In particular, this paper will evaluate the importance of the role of nuclear weapons in ensuring that the Kargil conflict did not escalate. In particular, the role of mutual nuclear deterrence obtaining between India and Pakistan is considered as a cause of non-escalation (despite General Musharraf's claims that Pakistani nuclear weapons were not 'operational' during the conflict, the most plausible account of Pakistan's nuclear weapons program dates the creation of a nuclear device deliverable by fighter aircraft to 1995).[5] This topic has been

[2] This summary of events is drawn from Gill, "Provocation, War and Restraint"
[3] Early and Asal, "Nuclear Weapons," 229
[4] Smoke, *War: Controlling Escalation*, 34-5
[5] Khan, *Eating Grass*, 189-90; also see Watterson, "Competing Interpretations," 91-3

the source of strong claims in the past; Kenneth Waltz famously claimed for example, that 'the obvious conclusion to draw from Kargil is that the presence of nuclear weapons prevented escalation.'[6] Although I argue below that nuclear weapons did play a role in preventing escalation, this conclusion is anything but obvious. The research question this paper will address is therefore:

> *What impact, if any, did mutual nuclear deterrence obtaining between India and Pakistan have on the Kargil conflict not escalating into a full-scale war?*

However, because this paper differentiates between the effects of mutual nuclear deterrence on the participants and the exogenous role that luck played during the conflict, the research question can be further divided into two parts. The first part of the research question:

> *What impact, if any, did mutual nuclear deterrence obtaining between India and Pakistan have on their crisis management during the Kargil conflict?*

And the second part:

> *Were the crisis management strategies of India and Pakistan jointly a sufficient condition for the Kargil conflict not escalating into a full-scale war?*

(For the purposes of this essay, 'crisis management' is defined as the sum of the escalatory and de-escalatory steps taken, and the restraint shown, during the conflict.)

[6] Waltz and Sagan, *The Spread of Nuclear Weapons*, 115

2. Explanations for Non-Escalation and Indian and Pakistani Restraint

As alluded to above, both India and Pakistan showed considerable restraint throughout the crisis and took a number of de-escalatory steps. The obvious first question to ask, then, is: why does this require an explanation? Why is this a puzzle? Indian and Pakistani restraint is a puzzle in want of an explanation for two reasons: because these actions cannot be explained by the military contingencies that existed during the conflict, and because both sides had felt so comfortable escalating in comparable situations previously.

To take the military aspect first; the Indian order decision not to cross the LoC cannot be explained purely in terms of military good sense. Indian infantry charging uphill (up-mountain, in fact) against heavily defended posts left them 'easy targets for Pakistani snipers and gunners'[7] due to the lack of ground cover. Bruce Riedel's testimony shows that the US feared that the Indians would get tired of this as casualties mounted and instead take the (militarily obvious) option of opening another front along the LoC to fight on territory more favourable to India.[8] This operational restraint was also extremely challenging for the air force, who not only had to hit near-invisible targets nestled in mountain hideouts at high speeds, but had to do while being unable to cross the LoC, forcing them to navigate missions in challenging and sometimes unsafe ways.[9] Similarly, and more obviously, the Pakistani decision not to provide reinforcements or air support for their besieged posts, even as the posts began to fall, cannot be described in terms of military effectiveness. Pakistan, rather than committing to the posts or opening up other fronts to draw off Indian forces, instead 'acquiesced in their annihilation', as P.R. Chari put it.[10]

In addition to the issues explaining this restraint in military terms, Indian and Pakistani restraint is also puzzling considering their previous military interactions. The most obvious parallel to draw with the Kargil conflict is the 1965 Indo-Pakistani war. As with the Kargil conflict, the 1965 conflict involved Pakistan attempting to gain control over Kashmir, specifically through the method of infiltrating Indian-controlled Kashmir with Pakistani soldiers disguised as locals. But there are two key differences from 1965 that must be noted: first, in 1965 India escalated the conflict horizontally almost immediately, opening a second front in the Punjab that posed a serious risk to Pakistan within a week of the Pakistani attack,

[7] Ganguly and Hagerty, *Fearful Symmetry*, 154
[8] Riedel, "American Diplomacy," 135
[9] Lambeth, "Airpower in India's 1999 Kargil War," 304
[10] Chari, "Reflections on the Kargil War," 363

in contrast to its unwillingness to open up a second front in 1999;[11] second, when Pakistan recognised that its venture had failed in 1965, it immediately escalated the conflict further, whereas in 1999, it backed down without attempting to save the plan through escalation.[12]

If this restraint is without historical precedent, and we cannot explain these decisions in terms of tactical military effectiveness (as seems obvious), then we must look to other explanations. Two classes of explanations for Indian and Pakistani behaviour are most prominent within the literature: those that focus on the role of mutual nuclear deterrence and those that focus on the role of the international community.

2.1 Nuclear Deterrence

The fact that Kargil took place just a year after the nuclear tests, and after a decade of 'opaque' nuclear deterrence, is a compelling *prima facie* argument that nuclear deterrence was the key reason for restraint. But the actual mechanism by which mutual nuclear deterrence led to restraint, and if it even had an impact at all, is the source of some debate. The section that follows analyses the mechanism by which this nuclearisation of the subcontinent affected escalation during the Kargil conflict, starting with a conceptual analysis of the oft-abused term, the 'stability-instability paradox', before progressing onto an analysis of three potential mechanisms.

2.1.1 The Stability/Instability Paradox and the Kargil Conflict

The stability/instability paradox is practically ubiquitous in the literature on the Kargil conflict, but there remains a conceptual fuzziness surrounding the concept. This causes a problem for anyone wishing to disaggregate the causal mechanisms present in the literature on the nuclear dimension of the Kargil conflict because scholars with theories that are, in fact, oppositional, will endorse the stability/instability paradox as a key finding of their work.

The stability-instability paradox is the theory that mutual nuclear deterrence obtaining between two states encourages lower-level conflict. Quite what is meant by 'lower-level' is the subject of debate, as is whether this divide separates the nuclear and conventional levels or the strategic and sub-strategic levels (these issues are addressed in the next section). The classic statement is Glenn Snyder's: 'The point is often made in the strategic literature that the greater the stability of the 'strategic' balance of terror, the lower the stability of the

[11] Ganguly and Hagerty, *Fearful Symmetry*, 160
[12] Rajagopalan, *What Stability-Instability Paradox*, 10

overall balance at its lower levels of violence.'[13] 'Stability' was defined by Snyder in terms of 'the propensity of the system to produce war.'[14] The most elegant summation of it in the context of the Kargil conflict comes from Paul Kapur: 'According to the paradox, strategic stability, meaning a low likelihood that conventional war will escalate to the nuclear level, reduces the danger of launching a conventional war. But in lowering the potential costs of conventional conflict, strategic stability also makes the outbreak of such violence more likely.'[15]

Unfortunately, key texts on the Kargil conflict posit a completely oppositional causal mechanism to the above. For example, although Sumit Ganguly and Devin Hagerty argue that 'Pakistani behaviour in precipitating this conflict conformed closely to the expectations of the 'stability—instability paradox,'[16] when actually discussing how the paradox had an impact on the conflict, Ganguly and Hagerty argued that it was the *high risk* of escalation to the nuclear level that caused Indian and Pakistani restraint: 'the mutual possession of nuclear weapons was the critical determinant in controlling both vertical and horizontal escalation. … Clearly, the mutual acquisition of nuclear weapons could not prevent low-level incursions in peripheral areas. However, their existence did ensure that the status quo state chose not to expand the ambit of conflict *for fear of generating uncontrollable escalation*.'[17] [emphasis mine] There is a conceptual confusion, then, as to whether the stability/instability paradox works via a low risk of escalation to the nuclear/strategic level or a high risk of escalation to the nuclear/strategic level.

Christopher Watterson terms these two causal stories the 'red line' model and the 'brinksmanship' model.[18] The red-line model assumes that escalation to the strategic level (Watterson endorses the strategic/sub-strategic distinction) is highly unlikely. Both parties will avoid any escalation to the strategic level when nuclear deterrence obtains, but because of the knowledge that this red line is highly unlikely to be crossed, both sides will be emboldened to engage in sub-strategic conflict, safe in the knowledge that this will not escalate.[19] The brinksmanship model, however, assumes that escalation to the strategic level is a serious risk that both parties fear. The risk of a sub-strategic conflict escalating to a

[13] Snyder, "The Balance of Power," 199
[14] *Ibid.,* 197
[15] Kapur, "Revisionist ambitions," 184-5
[16] Ganguly and Hagerty, *Fearful Symmetry*, 159
[17] *Ibid.,* 161-2
[18] Watterson, "Competing Interpretations", 86-88
[19] *Ibid.*, 86-87

strategic one encourages caution, meaning that one side may be incentivised to apply a small measure of military force safe in the knowledge that the adversary's reaction will be cautious so as to prevent escalation.[20] Following Watterson, because the red line model is the one most consistently associated with the stability-instability paradox, when talking about the stability/instability paradox, this henceforth implies the red line model.

In what follows; however, it is important to separate the stability/instability paradox into two arguments. The first argument is that there was a low likelihood of escalation to higher levels of conflict. The second argument is that this low likelihood of escalation encouraged the outbreak of conflict at lower levels. Logically, because the second argument is premised on the first, successfully arguing against the second argument discredits the stability/instability paradox as a whole. However, it is only this first part of the argument that has explanatory relevance with regards Indian and Pakistani restraint during Kargil; the next section covers this 'stability/instability model' of crisis escalation in more detail.

2.1.2 The Stability/Instability (No Escalation) Model

The first causal mechanism posited to explain the relationship between mutual nuclear deterrence obtaining between India and Pakistan and the restraint shown during the Kargil conflict is the 'stability/instability model' or 'no escalation' model. The stability/instability model argues that mutual nuclear deterrence ensures that the risk of escalation to the nuclear or strategic level is minimal. There exists a point, commonly called a 'firebreak' in the literature,[21] that marks a clear 'bright line' between the higher and lower levels of conflict. (The term 'red line' is also used, but this term has other connotations, so in the interests of conceptual clarity 'firebreak' is used exclusively in this context.) Both sides will feel emboldened to escalate below this firebreak, knowing that this escalation will not result in escalation above the firebreak.

A further conceptual confusion, however, is the cut-off point between the higher and lower levels of conflict. Put simply: where is the firebreak? The quote from Paul Kapur above on the stability/instability paradox quite clearly places the firebreak between the conventional and nuclear levels. This version of the paradox is in line with the classic statement by Snyder. However, in the South Asian context, this 'firebreak' has often shifted to between the conventional and sub-conventional level. For example, Rajesh Basrur argues that

[20] *Ibid.*, 87-88
[21] See, for example, Talmadge, "Too Much of a Good Thing"

conventional wars do have the risk of escalation to the nuclear level, and thus nuclear deterrence only encourages conflict at the 'subconventional level, where armed conflict is viewed as feasible since it is well below the threshold of conventional war and therefore less likely to produce the risk of escalation to the nuclear level.'[22] The subconventional level is defined as: 'a level below that of full-scale conventional war, such as through marginal armed combat … and the backing of nonstate actors fighting the adversary.'[23]

This criticism of the 'traditional' location of the firebreak as between the conventional and nuclear levels has some plausibility. It seems unlikely, for example, that Pakistan would refrain from first nuclear use were India to launch a full-scale invasion. But by shifting the firebreak to between the sub-conventional and conventional levels, Basrur runs into a different set of problems. Most notably, this argument requires defining Kargil as 'sub-conventional', something that can only be done by pointing, as Basrur does, to the fact that Pakistan had deniability with regards their involvement.[24] But the whole point of a 'firebreak' is that escalation is highly plausible once you cross it. Why, then, did India not escalate further when it was discovered that the intruders were Pakistani soldiers?[25] This shifting of the firebreak causes more problems than it solves.

Watterson attempts to solve this problem by drawing the firebreak, not between levels on the escalation ladder, but based on the political distinction between strategic and sub-strategic interests. Watterson argues that only a state's political interests of the highest importance ('core' or 'strategic' interests) being threatened could ever justify the use of nuclear weapons, at least under conditions of mutually assured destruction. Although states may define these interests differently, they almost always refer to 'matters of territorial integrity and political autonomy.'[26] Therefore, knowing that escalation to this strategic level (where the core interests of the state are threatened) is untenable, states can operate (and escalate) safely below this firebreak.

Accepting that the stability/instability model operates on the strategic/sub-strategic distinction, what would this model posit as the link between mutual nuclear deterrence and

[22] Basrur, "India's Pakistan Problem," 508
[23] Basrur, "Two Decades," 308
[24] Varun Sahni makes exactly the same point as a *criticism* of the applicability of the paradox, which seems a far more logical point to make. See Sahni, "The Stability-Instability Paradox"
[25] We could also solve the problem by defining limited war as below the threshold, but this runs into the problem of specifying the firebreak: 'how limited is limited?'
[26] Watterson, "Competing Interpretations," 86

restraint during the Kargil conflict? In fact, this model does not explain Indian and Pakistani restraint at all, because India and Pakistan were so far away from threatening one another's strategic interests. The firebreak was 'too far up the escalation ladder', as it were, to have an effect; both sides should have felt comfortable escalating in the knowledge that mutual nuclear deterrence provided a strategic 'cap' on one another's actions.[27] Watterson himself acknowledges this, arguing that the reason that India did not open another front along the LoC had more to do with military and diplomatic concerns than any fear of escalation.[28] This model therefore cannot account for Indian and Pakistani restraint during the Kargil conflict without reference to non-nuclear factors.

2.1.3 The Staircase (Deliberate Escalation) Model

The second causal mechanism posited to explain the relationship between mutual nuclear deterrence obtaining between India and Pakistan and the restraint shown during the Kargil conflict is the 'staircase model' or 'deliberate escalation model'.

The term 'staircase model' is drawn from the work of Mark Bell and Julia Macdonald. Bell and Macdonald acknowledge Watterson's distinction between explanations of the impact of nuclear deterrence that see the risk of escalation to the strategic level as highly unlikely and those that see escalation as a serious possibility. However, Bell and Macdonald make a further distinction between *different mechanisms* of escalation, specifically deliberate escalation (described in terms of incentives for nuclear first use) and inadvertent escalation (described in terms of crisis controllability). In Bell and Macdonald's typology, a staircase model applies in cases of deliberate escalation risk, and a 'brinksmanship model' in cases of inadvertent escalation risk. They argue that Kargil is a 'staircase crisis' because, while there was an incentive for Pakistan to use its nuclear weapons first (to escalate deliberately) both sides benefited from a high amount of crisis controllability (and thus inadvertent escalation was unlikely).[29]

Why would any actor deliberately use nuclear weapons first? Bell and Macdonald argue that there are three key reasons why an actor may deliberately use a nuclear weapon: because of a significant nuclear asymmetry, because of an 'asymmetric escalation' posture, or because of

[27] This finding mirrors Paul Kapur's criticism of the stability/instability paradox as being unable to explain Indian restraint during the Kargil conflict. See: Kapur "Revisionist Ambitions"
[28] Watterson, "Competing Interpretations," 96
[29] Bell and Macdonald, "How to Think"; and Bell and Macdonald "How Dangerous was Kargil"

the perception by leaders of an advantage to using a nuclear weapon first.[30] Significant nuclear asymmetry might lead to first use because it incentivises a 'splendid first strike' on the part of the stronger state, and therefore generates a 'use them or lose them' dilemma for the weaker state. One participant having an 'asymmetric escalation' posture, defined by Vipin Narang as being 'explicitly designed to deter conventional attacks by enabling a state to respond with rapid, asymmetric escalation to first use of nuclear weapons,'[31] may incentivise a nuclear first strike because states with this posture have strong incentives to 'undermine the so-called nuclear taboo in order to keep their nuclear threats credible.'[32] On the third point, Bell and Macdonald note that nuclear asymmetry and an asymmetric escalation posture can both 'only affect the dynamics of a crisis if they are perceived to exist by the leaders involved.'[33]

Having outlined the most important paths to nuclear first use, Bell and Macdonald argue that there are three key predictions that one would expect to see in a staircase crisis.[34] Firstly, because of the high level of crisis controllability, a staircase crisis is unlikely to rapidly escalate to the nuclear level without prior conventional escalation, and therefore in staircase crises that do not escalate close to the nuclear level (as in the Kargil conflict), the conventional balance of power should be decisive in determining the outcome. Secondly, the primary danger of nuclear use should be perceived to be a nuclear first strike rather than uncontrolled escalation. Thirdly, again because of the level of crisis controllability, escalation levels can be 'controlled and calibrated', and escalation, de-escalation and signalling are all possible.[35]

What would the staircase model suggest was the impact mutual nuclear deterrence had on Indian and Pakistani restraint during the Kargil conflict? During a staircase crisis, because there is a real risk of escalation to the nuclear level, both sides would be expected to act with a measure of caution and restraint, explaining Indian and Pakistani restraint at least to some extent. More specifically, the caution is induced by the danger of deliberate escalation by the other side; the caution comes from the (possibly implied) threat of deliberate nuclear first use.

[30] Bell and Macdonald, "How Dangerous Was Kargil," 138-9
[31] Narang, "What Does it Take to Deter," 486
[32] *Ibid.*, 502
[33] Bell and Macdonald, "How to Think," 45
[34] *Ibid.*, 53
[35] *Ibid.*, 48

Because of this, Indian and Pakistani restraint would be based not upon a generalised fear of loss of control, but in reaction to specific signals and escalatory steps by the other side.

2.1.4 The Brinksmanship (Inadvertent Escalation) Model

The third causal mechanism posited to explain the relationship between mutual nuclear deterrence obtaining between India and Pakistan and the restraint shown during the Kargil conflict is the 'brinksmanship model' or 'inadvertent escalation model'.

The brinksmanship model has its roots in Thomas Schelling's famous 'threats that leave something to chance.'[36] Because neither side could plausibly threaten a nuclear first strike in conditions of mutual nuclear deterrence, Schelling argued that both sides could instead engage in escalatory steps that raised the risk that the events would inadvertently spiral out of control. As both sides escalate little by little, they increase the mutual risk of a conflict that neither of them wants, in order to extract the concession that they do. As Robert Powell points out, whereas stability/instability type models see the risk of nuclear escalation as a completely fixed exogenous constant, the brinksmanship model sees risk as endogenous; something the actors can manipulate to gain concessions.[37]

But why does this mutual risk exist at all? After all, at some point, a nuclear weapon has to be fired; how could such a thing happen inadvertently? Bell and Macdonald outline four key pathways toward the inadvertent use of nuclear weapons: command and control failures, the accidental crossing of red lines, the interaction of nuclear and conventional forces, and poor communication.[38] Poor command and control arrangements, such as delegation to local commanders, increases the risk of both unauthorised and accidental nuclear use.[39] Poorly defined red lines for nuclear use may result in one side inadvertently crossing the other's red line during escalation, leading to the conflict 'skipping steps' and spiralling straight to the nuclear level. Cases where conventional forces attack (deliberately or otherwise) targets relevant to the adversary's ability to use their nuclear deterrent (such as their command-and-control assets or delivery platforms) may generate a 'use them or lose them' dilemma.[40] Finally, having no method of direct communication between participants in a crisis runs the risk of escalation through simple misperception of the other's intentions.

[36] See Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict*, 187-203
[37] Powell, "Nuclear Brinksmanship," 597
[38] Bell and Macdonald, "How To Think," 45
[39] As was the case during Kargil, see Bell and Macdonald, "How Dangerous Was Kargil"
[40] See Talmadge, "Too Much of a Good Thing," 210-9 for a discussion of the risks of conventional counterforce

Having outlined the most significant factors associated with inadvertent nuclear use, Bell and Macdonald argue that there are three key predictions that one would expect to see in a brinksmanship crisis. Firstly, because the crisis is defined by 'competitions in risk taking' and by 'the balance of resolve', the outcome of a brinksmanship crisis is not determined by the conventional or nuclear balance.[41] Secondly, the primary danger of nuclear use should be perceived to be uncontrolled escalation rather than a nuclear first strike.[42] Thirdly, signalling and escalation are possible, but we should expected significant escalation 'to be accompanied by fear that uncontrolled nuclear escalation might occur.'[43]

What would the brinksmanship model suggest was the impact mutual nuclear deterrence had on Indian and Pakistani restraint during the Kargil conflict? Because of the real risk of escalation to the nuclear level, both sides would be expected to act with a measure of caution and restraint, therefore explaining Indian and Pakistani restraint. This caution being induced by the danger of inadvertent escalation means that during a crisis, *all* escalatory steps carry the risk of rapid escalation to the nuclear level (as opposed to the controlled step-by-step escalation of the staircase model), implying an even more cautious approach might be warranted.

2.2 Other Explanations: The Role of the International Community

However, some authors have questioned the relevance of this nuclear deterrence literature to the issue of Indian and Pakistani restraint. The timing of the Kargil conflict (just a year after the nuclear tests by both countries) and its exceptional nature as a war between nuclear-armed states are both clearly key factors in the amount of academic interest in the topic. But, of course, this has no bearing on whether nuclearisation was what led to the restraint shown by both sides. As demonstrated above, advocates of the stability/instability model argue that Indian and Pakistani restraint must be explained by factors other than nuclearisation because nuclear deterrence would not have curtailed their escalatory behaviour until their strategic interests were threatened.[44]

But in the absence of nuclear deterrence as an explanation, what *did* cause Indian and Pakistani restraint? The most common set of alternative explanations focus on the role of the international community. Of the theories within this broad category, two are of particular

[41] Bell and Macdonald, "How To Think," 49
[42] *Ibid.*, 57-9
[43] *Ibid.*, 49
[44] See Watterson, for example

importance: diplomatic pressure from the United States and nuclear non-use norms. In fact, as we shall see below, these arguments are themselves an agglomeration of similar arguments: those that see the role of the United States as important in encouraging restraint differ as to whether this was purely as a 'crisis manager' or as part of a more focused (and impactful) 'deterrence diplomacy'; and those that argue for the role of nuclear non-use norms make the distinction between 'instrumental' and 'substantive' acceptance of the nuclear non-use norm. Just as 'nuclear deterrence' as an explanation for restraint requires disaggregating the different possible causal mechanisms, so too does 'the international community'.

2.2.1 American Diplomatic Pressure: A Crisis Manager Role or Deterrence Diplomacy?

The United States took an extremely active role in de-escalating the conflict from early on, and was undoubtedly the most important and influential international actor in terms of the course of the conflict. The US, traditionally an ally of Pakistan, led the international condemnation of Pakistani actions and privately lobbied other countries not to support the Pakistani intrusion, and Bill Clinton put immense pressure on Nawaz Sharif to back down in the face-to-face meeting that effectively ended the conflict.[45]

But the method and extent to which the US affected the non-escalation of the conflict is a matter of some debate. Most scholars, especially those who see the nuclear element as key, describe the role of the United States as 'crisis management' or a 'secondary' role. For example, Ganguly and Hagerty conclude that 'US intervention in the form of crisis management played a secondary, but important role,'[46] on the basis that the US were instrumental in convincing Pakistan to withdraw, although they completely reject that US intervention had any impact on Indian restraint.[47] Bell and Macdonald note the role of the US in improving crisis controllability by adding an additional channel of communication.[48] The easiest way to conceptualise US involvement in this 'crisis manager' role is perhaps best outlined by Abhijnan Rej, who argued that 'Tacit bargaining is a game, and games often need referees.'[49] By conceptualising the US as an impartial 'referee,' the crisis manager model sees the role of the US as a contributing condition[50] of Indian and Pakistani restraint.

[45] See Riedel, "American Diplomacy"
[46] Ganguly and Hagerty, *Fearful Symmetry*, 11
[47] *Ibid.*, 162
[48] Bell and Madonald, "How Dangerous Was Kargil,"142
[49] Rej, "S(c)helling in Kashmir" 177
[50] (In contrast to, say, a necessary condition or INUS condition of Indian and Pakistani restraint: see Mahoney, "Process tracing,"203-4)

Some scholars, however, have questioned this consensus of the US as impartial referee, arguing that it was in fact a major player during the crisis; some have gone so far as to argue that the US role in ensuring restraint was in fact a necessary condition of non-escalation.[51] Bhumitra Chakma contrasts the crisis manager model of US involvement with what he calls 'deterrence diplomacy', defined as: 'intense, focused diplomatic activity specifically to forestall crisis escalation and the outbreak of large-scale Indo-Pakistani war.'[52] In Chakma's view, the US was key both in the termination of the conflict (such as when Clinton pressured Nawaz at their face-to-face meeting), and in the restraint shown by both sides. In particular, Chakma argues that by constraining Indian military decisions and uniting the international community against Pakistan the US 'changed the strategic calculations of India and Pakistan.'[53] This deterrence diplomacy model therefore sees the role of the US as a direct, necessary cause of Indian and Pakistani restraint during the conflict.

2.2.2 Nuclear Non-Use Norms

Some scholars, such as Mario Esteban Carranza, have argued that nuclear deterrence is an insufficient explanation for the non-use of nuclear weapons during the Kargil conflict, and that 'the nuclear taboo, rather than nuclear deterrence, explains the non-use of nuclear weapons.'[54] The concept of the nuclear taboo owes much to the arguments of Nina Tannenwald, who provides a key distinction for thinking about the nuclear taboo: that of the *instrumental acceptance* of the taboo and the *substantive acceptance* of the taboo. In the first instance, Tannenwald argues, the taboo can 'enter the decision-making process instrumentally in the form of a perceived "cost,"' and in the second instance, the taboo can manifest as 'non-cost-benefit type reasoning along the lines of "this is simply wrong" in and of itself.'[55]

Assume that India and Pakistan had in fact both substantively accepted the nuclear taboo; how would this have impacted their restraint during Kargil? Interestingly, a substantive acceptance of the nuclear taboo has a very similar effect to the stability/instability model addressed above: nuclear threats are logically seen as less credible, there is a firm separation between the conventional and nuclear levels, and escalation to the nuclear level is therefore

[51] See Mistry, "Tempering Optimism," and Chakma, "Escalation Control"
[52] Chakma, "Escalation Control," 554
[53] *Ibid.*, 564
[54] Carranza, "Deterrence or Taboo," 441
[55] Tannenwald, "The Nuclear Taboo," 440

seen as highly unlikely.[56] This version of the nuclear non-use norm argument, therefore, would not be able to explain Indian and Pakistani restraint without recourse to other factors. However, there is, as Carranza himself notes, very little evidence that there was any substantive acceptance of the nuclear taboo; public support for nuclear weapons in Pakistan accounts for the weakness of the taboo there,[57] and there is also no evidence of any substantive acceptance on the Indian side.[58]

An 'instrumental' acceptance of the nuclear taboo, which Carranza argues is what prevented nuclear escalation during Kargil, is simply the realisation that there will be a substantial reputational cost in escalating toward, or past, the nuclear threshold. Although Carranza does not explicitly makes this distinction, implicit in his paper is the difference between the cost associated with actually violating the nuclear taboo (presumably being an international pariah), and the cost of being seen as a 'potential violator' of the taboo by escalating (being seen as an 'irresponsible nuclear power'). Assume, then, that India and Pakistan had in fact both instrumentally accepted the nuclear taboo; in what way would this have impacted on their restraint during the Kargil conflict? In short, instrumental acceptance of the nuclear taboo would have induced caution by raising the costs of escalation (the cost being the perceptions of the international community), thus incentivising a more cautious and restrained approach to escalation.

[56] Bell and Macdonald, "How to Think," 43
[57] Carranza, "Deterrence or Taboo," 451-2
[58] *Ibid.*, 453

3. Research Design

This paper will use process-tracing to answer both parts of the research question. Process tracing is, in broad terms, 'a set of procedures for formulating and testing explanations with case studies.'[59] More specifically, the process-tracing method 'attempts to identify the intervening causal process … between an independent variable (or variables) and the outcome of the dependent variable.'[60] The reasons for selecting process tracing as the methodology for this study are threefold: first, because it is one of the few methodological tools available for very small-N analysis (there are, after all, only two examples of nuclear-armed states engaging in direct armed conflict); second, because process tracing accepts that explanations should begin with the assumption that 'a plurality of causal factors work together to create an outcome,'[61] something that is very apparent in this case study; and third, because the main prerequisite for successful process tracing is the presence of sufficient evidence, and twenty years of academic interest in this case has ensured this.

However, the two parts of the research question are two logically distinct tasks We must therefore distinguish between using process tracing for *theory testing* and process tracing for *theory construction*. As James Mahoney argues, analysts who use process tracing are often interested in the question: 'What Xs caused Y in case Z?' The *theory construction task* is the task of identifying the possible Xs that may have caused Y in case Z, whereas the *theory testing task* is to test whether a particular X was a cause of Y in case Z.[62] The first part of the research question: 'What impact, if any, did mutual nuclear deterrence obtaining between India and Pakistan have on their crisis management during the Kargil conflict?' is an exercise in *theory testing*, because the goal is to assess whether a particular factor (nuclear deterrence obtaining) had a causal impact on a particular series of outcomes, namely the crisis management strategies of both sides. In contrast, the second part of the research question: 'Were the crisis management strategies of India and Pakistan jointly a sufficient condition for the Kargil conflict remaining 'limited' and not escalating?' requires *theory construction*, because we are attempting to identify other plausible necessary conditions for the Kargil conflict not escalating. The subsequent sections outline the approach taken to these two distinct questions.

[59] Mahoney, "Process tracing," 200
[60] George and Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development*, 141
[61] Blatter and Haverland, *Designing Case Studies*, 81
[62] Mahoney, "Process tracing," 201

3.1 Theory Testing: Explaining Indian and Pakistani Restraint

The proposed theory test to answer the question of what impact mutual nuclear deterrence and the international community had on Indian and Pakistani crisis management is as follows. The observable implications of each of the causal mechanisms (detailed above) are discussed in the below sections in detail. The case study section will then run this battery of tests (i.e. were the observable implications of the proposed mechanism present?) on *each* major escalatory and de-escalatory decision by India and Pakistan and attempt to illuminate which of the causal mechanisms has most explanatory power. Because many of these decisions are likely to be overdetermined, and because the two causal factors analysed (mutual nuclear deterrence and pressure from the international community) were not causally independent of one another, the use of process tracing is key.

Applying these tests to each major decision, rather than just the termination of the conflict, is far from a universally accepted approach. For example, Dinshaw Mistry argues that in examining whether nuclear deterrence explains escalation dynamics, the only relevant moment is 'the time de-escalation occurs rather than … the extended period of the entire crisis.'[63] This seems a quite substantial mistake. Escalation could theoretically have occurred at any point during the conflict, not simply at the point at which the crisis in fact ended. Further, as will be made clear in the case study, over the course of the few months of the Kargil conflict, substantial changes occurred in the relevance of the factors preventing escalation. Only looking at the factors immediately relevant to Nawaz's decision to withdraw Pakistani troops therefore misses two key points: that escalation could have occurred at any point and that the relative importance of nuclear and diplomatic factors changed over time.

3.1.1 Testing the Role of Mutual Nuclear Deterrence

As we saw above, the stability/instability, staircase and brinksmanship models are separated by two factors: whether the risk of nuclear escalation affected the restraint shown by India and Pakistan, and if so, whether this risk was the risk of deliberate first use of a nuclear weapon or inadvertent escalation. But these factors are theoretical categories rather than things we can directly empirically observe. What, then, are the observable implications of nuclear escalation risks affecting Indian and Pakistani crisis management?

[63] Mistry, "Tempering Optimism," 152

The first thing to test is whether the perception of nuclear escalation risk actually affected Indian and Pakistani decision-making. If there was *no* perceived nuclear escalation risk in India and Pakistani calculations, in line with the predictions of the stability/instability model, then we would expect three key observations to hold. Firstly, we would expect that nuclear threats would not be perceived as credible, and would therefore be unlikely to be made. Evidence of credible nuclear threats being made, and especially that a nuclear threat was credible enough to change the behaviour of the adversary, would be damaging to the theory. Secondly, we would expect decision-makers to feel free to escalate (up until close to the firebreak) with little regard for the nuclear danger. Evidence that there was, in fact, substantial care taken over each escalatory step would therefore count against the theory. Thirdly, we would expect key decision-makers to be untroubled by the possibility of nuclear escalation, and for nuclear weapons to enter into their calculations rarely, if at all. Therefore, evidence that nuclear weapons did in factor enter into the decision-making process, especially if this included discussions of nuclear escalation risks, would count against the theory.

If evidence of the perception of nuclear escalation risk is found, then the second thing to test is whether the risk perceived was that of deliberate or inadvertent escalation to the nuclear level. Because of the difficulty of directly evaluating the kind of escalation risk that was perceived by the participants in the conflict (after all, fear of nuclear escalation risk, no matter the kind, is likely to evoke a similar, cautious, response), this study will test the key predictions Bell and Macdonald make about staircase and brinksmanship crises, respectively.

There are three key observable implications of deliberate rather than inadvertent escalation risk (i.e. the perceived risk of a deliberate nuclear first strike) impacting on Indian and Pakistani crisis management that we can look for in the case study. First, we would expect the presence of (at least one of) the two primary pathways that Bell and Macdonald give for deliberate nuclear use: nuclear asymmetry and an asymmetric escalation posture. Evidence that either side *actually perceived* the other as having these incentives to use nuclear weapons first would be strong evidence in support of the theory. Second, because of the absence of rapid nuclear escalation, we would expect the outcome of the conflict to be determined by the conventional balance of power rather than the balance of resolve. Evidence that Pakistani resolve remained strong at the end of the conflict would therefore support the theory. Third, because of the ability to ‘calibrate’ escalation, decision-makers should feel more comfortable responding to escalation in small, calibrated steps; evidence that key decision-makers believed this approach was possible would be a strong endorsement of the theory.

The observable implications of inadvertent rather than deliberate escalation risk impacting on Indian and Pakistani crisis management are roughly the opposite. First, we would expect the presence of (at least one of) the pathways to inadvertent nuclear use: command and control failures, misperception of red lines, nuclear-conventional force interaction, and poor communication, in conjunction with evidence that the actors involved actually perceived that these pathways posed a nuclear risk. Second, we would expect the balance of resolve and competitions in risk-taking to be decisive in the outcome of the conflict, in conjunction with evidence that Pakistani resolve to continue the risk-taking broke at the end of the conflict. Finally, because the risk of inadvertent use accompanies every escalatory step, we would expect substantial caution in every escalatory step even at the lower levels of the escalation ladder, and evidence of this caution from key decision-makers.

3.1.2 Testing the Role of International Intervention

As we saw above, the crisis manager and deterrence diplomacy models of US intervention are primarily separated by whether the diplomatic pressure of the US was merely a contributing condition of Indian and Pakistani restraint (in the sense that it was just one of many factors that contributed) or played a primary, directly traceable causal role in the restraint shown during the conflict.[64] In particular, the novel claims by those that support the deterrence diplomacy model are twofold: first, that forceful US diplomacy directly limited Indian military options, leading to substantial Indian restraint; and second, that the entire international community closing ranks against Pakistan (itself primarily a product of American diplomacy), coupled with the face-saving agreement offered by Clinton, was the primary factor in the conflict terminating when it did. Every scholar I am aware of concedes that the US had at least a secondary or supporting role in the crisis; this is hard to dispute simply because of the well-established role the US had in helping communication between the two sides and the strong stance it took in insisting Pakistan withdraw. But what are the observable implications of American deterrence diplomacy substantially affecting Indian and Pakistani crisis management? There are two key sets of observable implications we can point to.

First, on the issue of whether US diplomacy directly limited Indian military options, we would expect to find evidence of significant US-Indian diplomatic exchanges, and for the

[64] I do not take a position on whether this was a necessary, INUS, or other type of condition, simply because of the problem of disentangling this as a separate factor from nuclear deterrence. For more on these types of conditions see Mahoney, "Process tracing," 203-4

content of these exchanges to relate to specific events on the ground, ideally by a short enough temporal distance that other factors didn't intervene in the meantime. This implication should be treated cautiously, as the order of operations becomes very important in this context; India promising the US that it would not cross the LoC and then not doing so may seem like strong evidence, but it may be that India had already decided it was not going to cross the LoC for other reasons. Second, on the issue of whether the international community and the 'out' offered by Clinton were the primary factors in the termination of the conflict, we would hope to find some direct evidence from Pakistani decision-makers that the response of the international community changed their strategic calculus, particularly their decision not to reinforce their posts as they began to fall. In assessing the importance of Clinton's face-saving agreement, we would expect to find some evidence of Pakistani resolve to continue the conflict in the absence of this, to avoid the risk of assigning causal weight to something epiphenomenal.

The final proposed mechanism by which the international community may have contributed to Indian and Pakistani restraint is through the international normative environment, specifically India and Pakistan's 'instrumental' acceptance of the nuclear taboo. In contrast to the mechanism proposed in the case of US intervention (that specific diplomatic interventions by the US had immediate short-term effects), the nuclear taboo works on a different basis: an expected loss of international reputation in the event of escalatory behaviour. The observable implications of the nuclear taboo affecting Indian and Pakistani restraint are simple: evidence among key decision-makers both of a recognition that the nuclear taboo existed, and a concern for the international reputation of the country involved during escalatory decisions. Most importantly, this evidence of reputational concerns must not suddenly appear in reaction to specific events (like condemnations by the international community), because recognition of the norm works as a check on escalatory action due to the *expectation* of reputational costs, so this recognition must therefore be present *before* the escalatory action if it is to work as a check.

3.2 Theory Construction: Explaining the Role of Luck Through Counterfactual Analysis

The proposed theory test to answer the question of whether Indian and Pakistani crisis management was jointly a sufficient condition for the Kargil conflict remaining 'limited' and not escalating is as follows. In attempting to identify other plausible necessary conditions for the Kargil conflict not escalating, the paper will use counterfactual analysis to isolate

potential (contingent, 'lucky') events that may have changed the course of the conflict and then explore the consequences of their counterfactual absence. Definitionally, a counterfactual cannot be conclusively proven, as Mistry notes: 'we cannot definitively prove that an event that did not occur (in this case, military escalation) would have occurred.'[65] This does not imply, however, that counterfactuals cannot prove (or at least suggest) the presence of *risk*, which is my intention.

In identifying potential causes, the key factor to bear in mind is the 'minimal rewrite': 'counterfactuals should require as few changes to the real world as possible.'[66] This rule is important because it allows for the identification of important (as opposed to merely trivial) necessary conditions, and allows us to easily imagine the event not happening without affecting other important causal chains. As Mahoney notes, the events that are ideal for counterfactual analysis are conceptualised as: '"small," "contingent," or "chancy" precisely because one can conceptualize them not happening if antecedent conditions had been only slightly different.'[67] Because of this, in examining the role of luck in the non-escalation of the crisis, the case study below will focus on small, contingent, 'chance' factors that directly impacted the crisis. In imagining their counterfactual absence, the analysis is largely dependent on the analysis of the previous section, hence the order of the questions. Examples of the potential causes covered below include the unseasonal opening of the Zoji La (sometimes referred to as the Zojila Pass)[68], an account of a potentially disastrous near-miss, and the fortuitous timing of the capture of Tiger Hill.

[65] Mistry, "Tempering Optimism," 152
[66] Mahoney, "Process tracing," 213
[67] *Ibid.*, 214
[68] Redundantly, because 'la' means 'mountain pass'

4. Case Study

The following sections aim to illuminate the factors that affected Indian and Pakistani crisis management over the course of the Kargil conflict through detailed process tracing. It is important to begin, however, by acknowledging the importance of the 'known unknowns' during the conflict: controversies on which there is simply not enough conclusive evidence on to warrant a sound judgement. Two controversies in particular stand out: first, whether the nuclear revolution emboldened Pakistan to undertake the Kargil intrusion, and the extent to which nuclear preparations were made by both sides during the conflict.

The idea that Pakistan were emboldened to undertake the Kargil conflict because of the nuclear revolution is a key prediction of the stability/instability paradox and a mainstay of the literature on the Kargil conflict.[69] However, this assumption was thrown into question by the detailed historical investigation undertaken in Peter Lavoy's collected volume, in which the authors argued that 'the planners of Kargil were not directly emboldened to undertake this operation because Pakistan's nuclear weapons capability was demonstrated in the previous summer … Kargil planners at the time still acted as if they lived in a prenuclear, conventional world. [70] The problem with deciding on this issue is the conditions of extreme secrecy under which Kargil was planned, as Feroz Khan notes: 'utmost secrecy was essential, and so only a few individuals were involved in the planning … Musharraf was consumed with the secrecy and surprise aspect of the plan and made sure that its details were on a need-to-know basis.'[71] Because of these difficulties in assessing the impact of the nuclear revolution on Pakistani planning for the incursion, this essay will not take a position on this key issue.

Of even more direct relevance to this study is the issue of the extent to which nuclear forces were deployed by both sides. Riedel's account of the Clinton-Nawaz meeting held the revelation that Clinton had confronted Nawaz with the accusation that nuclear preparations were underway.[72] The fact that US intelligence had indeed informed Clinton of this was confirmed by Strobe Talbott (Deputy Secretary of State): 'On the eve of Sharif's arrival, we learned that Pakistan might be preparing its nuclear forces for deployment.'[73] However, this claim has been strongly contested by Khan, among others, who points to the fact that no

[69] See, for example, the quote from Ganguly and Hagerty on page 8 of this paper
[70] Khan, Lavoy and Clary, "Pakistan's Motivations," 90
[71] Khan, *Eating Grass*, 309
[72] Riedel, "American Diplomacy," 139-40
[73] Talbott, *Engaging India*, 161

corroborating evidence has emerged since, and gives a plausible explanation from General Kidwai of Pakistan as to how American intelligence may have made a mistake.[74] To add to this controversy, an investigation by journalist Raj Chengappa alleged that India had increased its nuclear readiness to 'stage 3', meaning that nuclear forces were put on alert, but again, as Hoyt points out, this flies in the fact of official accounts and no corroborating evidence has emerged since.[75]Although knowing for certain whether both these claims are true or not would undoubtedly be pertinent to this study, it is important not to engage in speculation. Hopefully, further research can shed light on these continuing controversies.

4.1 Pakistan, The Intrusion, and the *Mujahideen* Fiction

As Pakistani troops crossed the LoC and found, to their surprise, vast swaths of the LoC unguarded, 'mission creep' quickly set in. In accordance with Smoke's view of escalation as an ever-present pressure or temptation, Pakistani troops pressed further and further onward into Indian territory as they came across the undefended posts. As Shaukat Qadir noted, based on his personal knowledge of those involved in the planning: 'The operation was, in my view, not intended to reach the scale that it finally did. In all likelihood, it grew in scale as the troops crept forward to find more unoccupied heights, until finally they were overlooking the valley.'[76]

The Indian prime minister was not formally briefed about the Kargil intrusion until the 18th of May, by which point Pakistan held posts across a swath of the LoC. A few days after this, when it had become clear that the intruders were Pakistani troops, Vajpayee telephoned Nawaz and directly stated that Pakistan's role in the intrusions had been discovered. [77] It was at this point in the conflict that the first true escalatory step took place: Nawaz, instead of taking Vajpayee's offer to blame the crisis on the military and give 'safe passage' to the intruders, instead doubled down and persisted in the *mujahideen* fiction. Once Pakistan's role was uncovered, Nawaz could have simply backed off. The incursion could then have been conceptualised as a limited probe: 'a small, calibrated incursion to test and clarify the adversary's willingness to fight and defend its territory.'[78] Instead, what Pakistan attempted was more akin to a *fait accompli*: where the objective is to 'deprive the defender of time and

[74] Khan, *Eating Grass*, 314-5
[75] Hoyt, "Kargil: the nuclear dimension," 158-9
[76] Qadir, "An Analysis of the Kargil Conflict," 26
[77] Lavoy, "Why Kargil did not," 194
[78] Ganguly and Hagerty, *Fearful Symmetry*, 157-8

opportunity to reverse his policy of no commitment.'[79] Indeed, Joeck persuasively argues that Pakistan were ultimately caught between a limited probe (using the 'mujahideen' cover to forestall embarrassment if they withdrew) and a *fait accompli* (because Pakistan were committed to not retreating once actually on the territory) and ended up with the worst of both worlds: enough commitment that they couldn't plausibly deny involvement, but too little to actually complete the *fait accompli*.[80]

What are we to make of this first key escalatory step? The key point, of course, is that Pakistan demonstrated enough commitment to the Kargil venture to persist in holding the posts even when it became clear that they had been unmasked. The most significant point in this regard is that it revealed that Pakistan had no understanding whatsoever that such an obviously adventurist step would not be tolerated by the international community now that Pakistan was a nuclear power. It is clear that Pakistan did not have even an instrumental understanding of the 'nuclear taboo', or they would have realised that any nuclear power that was perceived to be taking part in adventurism would be viewed negatively and that the international community would not support them. This is particularly damning in view of the fact that Pakistan *wanted* international intervention in the conflict, and so were very clearly unaware of the international opprobrium they were about to face; indeed, Pakistani decision-makers did not expect the international isolation that followed the Kargil conflict, and were shocked by the near-unanimous international support India received.[81] The other theoretical implication is fairly obvious: Pakistan were in no way restrained by the fear of nuclear escalation, and very clearly did not see crossing the LoC as a 'red line' for nuclear use at the start of the conflict (at least when they did it!).

4.2 Indian Restraint and Escalation: The LoC Decision and the Introduction of Airpower

As the full extent of Pakistani involvement became clear, it became apparent that expelling the intruders would require more firepower. A meeting on May 18th saw Lieutenant General Chandra Shekhar (Vice-Chief of the Army Staff, deputising for the absent General V.P. Malik) attempt to convince Air Marshal A.Y. Tipnis of the need for air support, though his request was rejected. As Ganguly and Hagerty note, Tipnis recommended against the use of airpower for two reasons. Though the first was a practical concern regarding high altitude helicopter performance, the second was much more fundamental: that airpower 'could

[79] Joeck, "The Kargil War," 126
[80] *Ibid.*, 124-7
[81] See, for example Tellis et al., *Limited Conflicts*, 8-13

escalate and enlarge the scope of the conflict',[82] something that India evidently desperately wanted to avoid. By the next week, however, the need for air support had become more critical, and after securing the support of the heads of the Navy and Air Force, General V.P. Malik successfully argued his case before the Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS) in meetings on the 24th and 25th of May.[83] The use of IAF aircraft, however, came with one crucial stipulation; there would be, in Vajpayee's words, 'no crossing the LoC,' even when aircraft were targeting opponents on the Indian side of the line.[84] As Joeck notes, Vajpayee clearly recognised that the use of airpower was an 'escalatory step'[85], and his caution in this instance is striking: Vajpayee refused to let airpower cross into Pakistani airspace even when it was targeting (confirmed) Pakistani troops encamped on the Indian side of the LoC. It should be noted that this cautious approach did not stop Pakistani officials from claiming that the IAF had hit targets on the Pakistani side.[86]

What reasons can we suggest for this cautious approach to a (relatively restrained) escalatory step, and, more generally, for this initial decision not to cross the LoC? There was no US pressure to do so; Washington's involvement did not begin until the 24th May, with demarches to India and Pakistan.[87] The two major theory tests, then, are whether there is evidence that India were restrained because they were concerned about the reputational costs of being seen as an 'irresponsible nuclear power', and whether there is evidence that India were restrained because of the caution induced by fear of nuclear escalation.

On the first question, there is a reasonable amount of evidence that India were concerned with their international reputation in responding cautiously to Pakistan. Writing ten years after the conflict, General V.P. Malik outlined five reasons India did not cross the LoC during the conflict: the political leadership taking time to realise the extent to which India-Pakistan relations had deteriorated after the Lahore Summit, poor intelligence, the need to keep international opinion on side, the need to show 'greater responsibility and restraint'[88] as a nuclear power, and the desire to avoid international intervention (and thus a ceasefire) while Pakistani troops were occupying Indian territory.[89] The 'need to keep international opinion on

[82] Ganguly and Hagerty, *Fearful Symmetry*, 154
[83] *Ibid.*, 154-55
[84] Lambeth, "Airpower in India's 1999 Kargil War," 298
[85] Joeck, "The Kargil War," 133
[86] Ganguly and Hagerty, *Fearful Symmetry*, 154-55
[87] Jones and McMillan, "The Kargil Crisis," 364
[88] Malik, "Kargil War," 351
[89] *Ibid.*, 351-2

side' would not have been a factor at this early stage of the conflict (the operative word is 'keep'). The key factor, then, is the acknowledgement by Malik that India was aware that its nuclear status would lead to a difference in how its actions would be perceived (in stark contrast to Pakistan!), and acted with restraint in accordance with that. In a later interview with Paul Kapur, Malik said that India did not cross the LoC: 'mainly out of concern for world opinion: 'The political leaders felt that India needed to make its case and get international support' for its position in the conflict.'[90] The fact that this concern for their international reputation appears to predate international intervention in the conflict is particularly strong evidence that there was a recognition of the international normative expectations around nuclear weapons, and a desire in particular to be seen as a 'responsible nuclear power'.

On the second question, the extreme restraint with which India acted is suggestive evidence that this caution was influenced by the nuclear danger. This suggestion is confirmed by interviews with key decision-makers. In an interview with Vipin Narang, Brajesh Mishra (Indian National Security Advisor) acknowledged that crossing the LoC entailed the risk of nuclear weapons being used; although India were '95 percent sure that we wouldn't have to cross the LoC … the use of nuclear weapons would have been risked if we did.'[91] There is therefore substantial evidence that India acted cautiously due to a fear of nuclear escalation. The caution with which India acted can certainly not be explained by the stability/instability model; India were cautious in responding with an escalatory step *on their own side of the border*, a metaphorical mile away from Pakistan's key strategic interests. Overall, Indian restraint in this instance was likely overdetermined: although there was an increased concern for their international reputation in light of nuclearisation, India likely would have been just as restrained due to the caution induced by the fear of nuclear use, not to mention the reluctance by Vajpayee at this early stage to believe that Nawaz had double-crossed him after all the goodwill generated by Lahore.

4.3 Escalatory Steps, Nuclear Threats, and International Pressure

From the introduction of airpower on 25th May to the fall of the highest point on the Tololing Ridge on 20th June, it was by no means clear that India would be able to retake the posts Pakistan held on the Indian side of the LoC before the onset of winter without resorting to

[90] Kapur, "Ten Years," 78
[91] Narang, *Nuclear Strategy*, 272

further escalation. The threat of escalation was thus ever-present, even if it was not in fact realised (at least along the LoC). During this period, the immediate military situation along the LoC remained in Pakistan's favour, although shelling from Bofors guns and bombing runs from the IAF were beginning to take their toll, and thus the escalatory 'action' took place away from the battlefield.

Although India did not escalate the conflict along the LoC after the introduction of the IAF, they did horizontally escalate away from the LoC. India made a number of calculated moves to signal military resolve in the case of a wider war: India placed army and air force units along the international border on alert, redeployed forces from the western and southern commands to positions on the international border,[92] and even summoned their lone amphibious brigade to the west coast. Further, the Indian navy shifted its annual military exercise from the east to the west (the Bay of Bengal to the Arabian Sea).[93] These were obvious and easily readable signals with one intention: to demonstrate to Pakistan that India was prepared and had the resolve for wider war. In addition to India's demonstrated capability to launch such an attack, they also undoubtedly had the resolve; this is supported by the revelation that on 18th June, General Malik ordered senior commanders to 'be prepared for escalation – sudden or gradual – along the LoC or the international border.'[94]

During this period, the first uses of nuclear threats by India and Pakistan began to arise. The most significant threat of this type (in that it was made by an actual government official and was noted on the Indian side) is the statement by Shamshad Ahmed (Pakistani foreign secretary) made on 30th May: 'he warned India that Pakistan could use "any weapon" to defend its territorial integrity.'[95] As Timothy Hoyt argues, this veiled nuclear threat is relevant because ordinarily Pakistani statements on nuclear doctrine focus on nuclear weapons as a 'last resort', whereas this appeared to imply that Pakistan were considering a nuclear first strike if India crossed the LoC.[96] The timing of this statement is particularly relevant, coming as it did less than a week after India started using airpower. Many other nuclear threats were made, but as Hoyt notes in his excellent study, these were mostly *ad hoc* remarks made with little thought for the possible escalatory implications. Of these, the most terrifyingly flippant was made by Pakistan's minister of information, Mushahid Hussain who

[92] Joeck, "The Kargil War," 132
[93] Gill, "Provocation," 711-2
[94] Lavoy, "Why Kargil did not" 192
[95] Hoyt 156
[96] *Ibid.*, 156

replied to a question on a possible Pakistan No First Use (NFU) pledge with this: 'Well, what do they say, 'Que sera, sera,' what will be will be. We hope it will not come to the nuclear thing.'[97] On the Indian side, nuclear threats were only made as similarly offhand responses to Pakistani nuclear threats.[98]

These threats were matched by growing alarm from the international community. Early signals that the US and the international community were coming down on the side of immediate Pakistani withdrawal were there: on 29th May Assistant Secretary Inderfurth told the NYT that the intruders would have to leave, the same day that UN Secretary General Kofi Annan said that Pakistan was violating the LoC.[99] It is notable that India were pleasantly surprised when the first serious effort was made by the US to defuse the conflict; on 3rd June Clinton sent letters to both prime ministers encouraging both to 'respect the Line of Control' and indicating that withdrawal of Pakistani forces was a precondition for a settlement.[100] Up until this point, India had assumed that international intervention would be against their interests.

What implications can we draw from this period? The period witnessed the first nuclear threats of the conflict, and it is notable that the most significant of these came almost immediately after the entry of the IAF into the conflict and as India were building up troops on the international border. It is also notable that this threat came at a time when any international intervention was expected to be favourable to Pakistan; until the Clinton letter on 3rd June, Pakistan would have expected that any attempt by the US to intervene would have been in their favour, as evinced by Indian surprise at the move.[101] This period provides further evidence of the caution engendered by nuclear risk, at least on the Indian side; even in engaging in military redeployment, India did so carefully and incrementally in order to put sustained pressure on Pakistan rather than panic them into thinking an invasion was imminent. In terms of the nuclear threats, the flippancy of Pakistani threats proves beyond a doubt that Pakistan was completely unaware of the reputational damage they were doing to

[97] *Ibid.*, 158
[98] *Ibid.*, 157
[99] Lavoy, "Why Kargil did not," 198
[100] *Ibid.*, 198
[101] Hoyt uses this to argue that Pakistan was likely: 'manipulating the nuclear threat, publicly setting a deliberately lowered nuclear threshold in an effort to spur international intervention' (Hoyt, "Kargil: the nuclear dimension," 156-7)

themselves during the conflict, and of the effects of nuclearisation on international perceptions.

4.4 Crossing the LoC: A Necessary Debate

As the conflict moved into mid-June with no sign of Indian victory in sight, the crisis quietly reached its apex, with only those within the Indian government aware of the internal machinations. The crisis, would of course, begin to turn in India's favour from the 13th of June onwards, culminating in the capture of the highest point along the Tololing Ridge on the 20th of June. Worryingly, Peter Lavoy's research has uncovered that India came quite close to opening up another front along the LoC around this time.[102] The possible implications of this are covered in section 4.6 below.

The reasons for this desire to cross the LoC are clear. By mid-June, mounting casualties on the Indian side meant that escalation pressure was at breaking point. Various figures in the military were pushing to allow Indian forces to cross the LoC, but as Brig. Gen. (Ret.) Gurmeet Kanwal subsequently related, Vajpayee was reluctant to escalate despite these increasing pressures:

> *'General Malik explained to Vajpayee that the armed forces could abide by the order not to cross the LoC but that, tomorrow, if the armed forces are unable to expel the Pakistani infiltrators or were sustaining heavy losses, the government may need to consider his request to expand the conflict or threaten to open an additional front. General Malik said Vajpayee looked "aghast" and said, "but General Sahib, voh thho atom bomb hai (they have a nuclear bomb)!"'*[103]

This is indisputable evidence of both serious escalation pressure within the Indian civil-military establishment and the caution induced by nuclear weapons in making escalatory decisions. Firstly, it is clear from this that Vajpayee was loath to cross the LoC due to the nuclear risk, but given a choice between crossing the LoC and ceding the Kargil heights to Pakistan, it seems from this evidence that he would have certainly risked it. In Paul Kapur's assessment, based on interviews with all the key decision-makers, 'Had the Indians not prevailed from behind the LoC, they probably would have crossed the line and escalated the conflict.'[104] Secondly, it is interesting to note what it was precisely that the Indians feared. In

[102] Lavoy, "Why Kargil did not," 192-3
[103] Narang, *Nuclear Strategy*, 272
[104] Kapur, "Ten Years," 79

his interview with Vipin Narang, Brajesh Mishra illustrated what was apparently a common fear among the BJP (if not the military): 'Mishra suggested that the BJP also feared the "mad man" possibility: that a lower-level commander might use nuclear weapons if Indian forces even advanced across the LoC.'[105] This is an explicit endorsement of India fearing *unauthorised* escalation specifically, which makes sense considering Pakistan's poor command and control policies; specifically their policy of delegation to local commanders.

It is likely that it was around this time that Vajpayee started looking for other options. In public, he and Malik continued to assert that crossing the LoC was on the table, perhaps in the hope of getting Pakistan to back down in light of the changing international situation.[106] But an interesting tactic emerged in the light of the international community's support for India. In mid-June Vajpayee sent a letter to Clinton explaining that India might have to attack across the LoC if Pakistan did not withdraw; this letter caused such a scare in Washington that General Zinni was dispatched to Islamabad on the 22nd of June to talk Sharif down.[107] Brajesh Mishra later revealed that in the letter, Vajpayee had bluntly written to Clinton 'One way or the other, we will get them out', and intimated that not only was crossing the LoC not ruled out, neither was the use of nuclear weapons.[108] As Rej notes, this threat is simply not plausible, and indeed, the only conclusion we can draw from this is that: 'Vajpayee was playing up the risk of nuclear war to generate American pressure on Pakistan.'[109] With India unable to achieve its goals without escalating the conflict, Vajpayee sought to inflate the risk of the conflict in order to get Pakistan to back down, but cleverly, did this *through the United States*. In addition to the evidence of inadvertent escalation fears, then, we have another key prediction of the brinksmanship theory; that both sides will inflate the risk of a nuclear exchange in the hope of forcing the less resolute opponent to back down. The only difference, it seems, is that India calculated it had a better chance of getting concessions through the United States.

4.5 The Turning Tide: Pakistani Defeat and Conflict Termination

By the time Nawaz got to Blair House on 4th July, he had effectively seen the entire Kargil venture crumble in front of his eyes over the previous few weeks. On the military front, the

[105] Narang, *Nuclear Strategy*, 272-3
[106] See, for example, Mistry, "Tempering Optimism," 156, reference 27
[107] Lavoy, "Why Kargil did not," 200
[108] Rej, "S(c)helling in Kashmir," 176
[109] *Ibid.*

Indian capture of Tololing Ridge on 20th June had made Pakistan stare the prospect of defeat in the face for the first time, and just ten hours before, a key Indian strategic objective, the capture of Tiger Hill, had been completed.[110] On the diplomatic front, things were even worse. The quiet private tone of Clinton's initial letter on 3rd June had been replaced by calls to withdraw: on 15th June Clinton called Sharif and bluntly told him to withdraw, and by 20th June the G8 had issued a communiqué calling for the LoC to be respected.[111] The General Zinni mission, launched by Vajpayee's letter, put additional pressure on Pakistan, but the real problem was China's studied neutrality on the issue, which essentially buried the prospect of any international support. As noted by a senior diplomat, only US intervention 'could save Pakistan from a major disaster that was looming on the horizon.'[112] Once it became clear that this was not going to happen, Nawaz grasped the smallest of face-saving measures by Clinton and effectively ended the conflict.

The key question is, of course, why Nawaz backed down, and why the conflict terminated when it did. Nawaz and Clinton's joint statement was the subject of vicious criticism in Pakistan,[113] and Nawaz must have known the withdrawal would be a major political issue. On the one hand, of course, the military losses were decisive. But Pakistan could have simply reinforced the posts had they been resolved to holding the territory. And indeed, the balance of resolve may well have been in Pakistan's favour; it is certainly perceived to have been by many scholars.[114] If Pakistan were so resolved to hold the territory, why did they not reinforce the posts? The answer to this question can only be answered by Nawaz himself, but it seems that neither the conventional balance of power nor the balance of resolve can independently explain why Kargil terminated when it did. Rather, it was Pakistan's international isolation. Pakistan could not achieve its political goals on Kashmir without international intervention, preferably a ceasefire that would have frozen the troops in place (this was an outcome that India certainly feared). Absent consistent pressure from the international community, Pakistan could have gone on inflating the nuclear threat in an attempt to internationalise the conflict and generate intercession. The only other pathway to their ultimate strategic goal was an all-out war with India, something they were not prepared

[110] Ganguly and Hagerty, *Fearful Symmetry*, 161
[111] Lavoy, "Why Kargil did not" 200
[112] Gill, "Provocation," 717
[113] Lavoy, "Why Kargil did not" 189
[114] See Bell and Macdonald's justification for coding Kargil as a staircase crisis in the above sections

to risk. The strong stance taken by Clinton, coupled with the face-saving measure offered to Nawaz, were therefore the only realistic way out of the conflict Nawaz could take.

4.6 The Role of Luck

While the previous sections have looked at the varied and complex impacts of the nuclear revolution and the international community on Indian and Pakistan crisis management, we now turn explicitly to a question implicit in much of what has gone before: were Indian and Pakistani actions *sufficient* to prevent escalation, or did the other factors play a role? This brief final section evaluates the role of one key factor on the conflict not escalating: luck. In following the 'minimal rewrite rule' discussed above, it is important to consider that the counterfactuals must be as small a rewrite from the real world as possible. With this in mind, there are two key counterfactuals that will be considered here: what would have happened if the recently revealed near-miss of an Indian fighter-bomber on the Pakistani high command had in fact happened, and what would have happened if India had failed to take the Tololing Ridge by the 20th June.

This first point has not been discussed before in this essay, as it has no relevance to the wider strategic implications of the conflict, but is an absolutely key example of the dangers of inadvertent escalation in conditions of a tense nuclear standoff. As Gill notes, it was revealed in 2017 that: 'Indian fighter-bombers may unknowingly have come within moments of bombing a location where Nawaz Sharif, Musharraf and other Pakistani leaders were meeting with troops on 24 June.'[115] The precise conditions led to the IAF accidentally bombing Pakistani high command are still unclear, but we can draw two key conclusions from this finding: the first is that it vitiates Vajpayee's strong demands for the IAF to stay behind the LOC, and the second is the ever-present danger of a mistake having catastrophic consequences in such a tense environment. There were few worse points in the India-Pakistan relationship for the Indians to accidentally wipe out Pakistani high command than 24th June 1999. It would have undoubtedly escalated immediately into a full-scale conventional war, and considering the well-known Pakistani command and control situation, any speculation beyond this leads to an unpleasant conclusion.

The second point is certainly the more theoretically interesting one. As was discussed in detail above, India seriously considered crossing the LoC as escalation pressure rose into

[115] Gill, "Provocation," 715 (reference 46)

mid-June, and Peter Lavoy has argued that had Tololing Ridge not fallen, the Indians would have crossed the LoC to be rid of the intruders. But what would the consequences of such an action have been? The finding to note is that Pakistan had no expectation of what India were planning. As Joeck notes, Pakistan completely misinterpreted the nature and implications of Indian military build-ups in Kashmir and on the international border, and General Musharraf has since said that had India expanded the war, then Pakistan would have taken the opportunity to broaden the conflict themselves! Musharraf argues that India had 'bottled up' its forces in Kashmir and thus was susceptible to being cut off by a counteroffensive.[116] Of course, as with all *post-hoc* statements of public figures, it is difficult to pick apart the truth from bravado here, but Lavoy's analysis has confirmed the weaker point: that Pakistan were completely unprepared for India to cross the LoC. As Lavoy concludes:

> *In the end, had Indian forces not succeeded at the tactical level, they undoubtedly would have crossed into Pakistan's unprotected territory, thus creating a very real possibility of escalation to full-scale war and possibly even a nuclear exchange.*[117]

[116] Joeck, "The Kargil war," 132-3
[117] Lavoy, "Why Kargil did not," 193

5. Key Findings

The key findings of the above analysis are as follows:

Firstly, there is overwhelming evidence that nuclear weapons did induce caution and restraint through the fear of nuclear escalation. Every one of the observable implications of the stability/instability model being true were proven false: nuclear threats were made and were perceived as credible (particularly that of Shamshad Ahmed on the 30th of May), there was extreme caution taken over every escalatory step, particularly on the Indian side, and key decision-makers were extremely troubled by the possibility of nuclear escalation.

Secondly, there is some evidence that the risk that induced this restraint was one of inadvertent escalation. In particular, the above analysis noted the presence of two of the possible pathways to inadvertent escalation outlined by Bell and Macdonald: command and control failures (the 'madman' worry present in the BJP) and the misperception of red lines (the Indians were clearly unsure as to whether the LoC was a red line for nuclear use or not, but the evidence seems to suggest they may have risked it). In addition, substantial caution accompanied every escalatory step, even those low on the escalation ladder. However, it certainly seems that the balance of conventional forces was more significant in ending the conflict than the balance of resolve. The evidence is therefore mixed in this regard.

Thirdly, there was not sufficient evidence to argue, as Chakma does, that US deterrence diplomacy specifically prevented India from escalating the conflict by crossing the LoC. Although the US certainly made great efforts in preventing this outcome, the evidence seems to suggest that the risk of nuclear escalation was more significant, especially considering that the first Indian decision not to cross the LoC was made before the onset of any international pressure. On the claim that the international community and Clinton's diplomacy were the primary factors in the termination of the conflict, there was suggestive evidence that the strong stance of the international community narrowed Nawaz's options to either full-scale war or backing down, and therefore, was the most important immediate factor in the conflict terminating when it did.

Fourthly, there was no evidence whatsoever that the 'instrumental nuclear taboo' discussed by Carranza was accepted by Pakistan, and there was a huge amount of evidence the other way, most notably Pakistan's complete obliviousness to the international opprobrium they were about to receive when they launched the Kargil incursion. There is limited evidence that

India instrumentally accepted the nuclear taboo, especially during their initial decision not to cross the LoC, but this initial restraint was probably overdetermined.

Finally, this study concluded by arguing that the actions taken by India and Pakistan to manage the crisis were not sufficient in and of themselves to prevent escalation to full-scale war. Instead, they relied on a substantial amount of luck to prevent both inadvertent escalation and deliberate horizontal escalation (through an inadvertent misperception of red lines for nuclear use) had India been unable to gain its objectives by staying on their side of the LoC.

To answer the question with which this paper began, mutual nuclear deterrence had a significant impact on the Kargil conflict not escalating into a full-scale war. Mutual nuclear deterrence encouraged substantial caution because of the perceived risk of escalation to the nuclear level, and was the key factor in preventing conflict escalation, although the role of the international community was likely decisive in the conflict ending when it did. But despite the positive effects of the nuclear revolution on the caution with which the participants approached the conflict, this study also demonstrated the ever-present risk of inadvertent escalation to the nuclear level (the factor, of course, which caused the restraint in the first place). Thus, while the risk of nuclear escalation induced substantial caution that played a key role in the conflict remaining limited, the most plausible path to full-scale escalation (India crossing the LoC in the event of further military losses, due to mutual misperception of Pakistani red lines) was in fact prevented by factors that very much left something to chance; namely, that Indian forces took key positions in the Kargil heights at a time when escalation pressure was at its highest. Had these factors not been present, the restraint and de-escalatory steps taken by India and Pakistan would most likely not have prevented the escalation of the conflict into full-scale war.

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