

Steve Fetter
“Nuclear Deterrence and the 1990 Indo-Pakistani Crisis,”
International Security, Vol. 21, No. 1 (Summer 1996).

To the Editors:

I found Devin Hagerty’s account of the 1990 Indo-Pakistani crisis a valuable addition to the literature on nonproliferation. Hagerty has done us a service by gathering arguments and evidence that suggest that India and Pakistan were not on the brink of nuclear war. As the history of scholarship on the Cuban Missile Crisis has shown, however, confident assessments of the true risks of nuclear war during this incident will not be possible until more documentary evidence is available to scholars. But even if Hagerty turns out to be correct about the 1990 Indo-Pakistani crisis, he grossly overstates the general lessons for deterrence and proliferation that can be learned from this—or any other—case study.

Hagerty labels the two schools of thought on the consequences of nuclear proliferation the “logic of proliferation” and the “logic of deterrence.” Based on a detailed examination of the 1990 crisis, together with the fact that nuclear weapons have not been used since 1945, Hagerty concludes that the latter theory is more valid than the former: “In South Asia, at least, the logic of nuclear deterrence has been closer to the mark than the logic of nonproliferation.”¹ He writes: “Past practice indicates that in the area of crisis stability, the logic of nuclear deterrence is more robust than the logic of nonproliferation” (p. 84). I sincerely hope that Hagerty is correct, but the evidence he cites does not prove the point.

First, Hagerty exaggerates the claims of those who are pessimistic about the consequences of nuclear proliferation:

my theoretical analysis and the South Asian case study call into question the utility of the concept of the “reciprocal fear of surprise attack.” The notion that nuclear weapon states embroiled in a crisis *will inevitably face strong, perhaps irresistible, pressures* to decapitate their opponent’s nuclear forces preemptively is deductively appealing but empirically unsupported (p. 113, emphasis added).

¹ Devin T. Hagerty, “Nuclear Deterrence in South Asia: The 1990 Indo-Pakistani Crisis,” *International Security*, Vol. 20, No. 3 (Winter 1995/96), p. 82. Subsequent citations to this article are in parentheses in the text.

Proliferation pessimists do not claim that deterrence will certainly, usually, or often fail in a crisis. They merely claim that the risks of nuclear proliferation are unacceptably high compared to the alternative of nonproliferation—high not only for the proliferators, but for the international community as a whole. These risks are not limited to deliberate preemptive attack, but include accidental, inadvertent, or unauthorized use of nuclear weapons. Fear of nuclear attack may have deterred a fourth Indo-Pakistani war, but at what risk to human life and international peace and security? An Indo-Pakistani war without nuclear weapons would have been a serious calamity, but a war *with* nuclear weapons that escalated to attacks on cities would have resulted in civilian casualties of a magnitude and suddenness unprecedented in human history.

The Risks of Deterrence

Hagerty cites the “unblemished record of political leaders resisting the temptation to decapitate their enemies’ nuclear existing forces” as strong evidence against the “logic of proliferation” (p. 85). But the fact that deterrence held in one crisis, or even ten crises, does not prove that the risks of nuclear deterrence are acceptable, any more than 24 successful launches proved that the Space Shuttle met an acceptable standard of reliability, or twenty years’ experience operating civil nuclear reactors proved that the risk of a meltdown was acceptably low.

The successful resolution of a single nuclear crisis does not provide meaningful evidence about the probability of nuclear war over the long term. Deterrence is a threat that leaves something to chance, and the risk that a crisis might escalate out of control is a powerful factor that moderates the behavior of prudent leaders. The key question isn’t whether deterrence can fail, but how likely such failures are. If a one percent chance of a nuclear conflagration is too great a risk to run, then the fact that deterrence was successful in one or two crises is a completely inadequate basis for rejecting the “logic of proliferation.”

An examination of past nuclear crises should not make one optimistic that the risks of nuclear deterrence are acceptably low. While it is true that even the most extreme crisis—the Cuban missile crisis—was resolved without resort to nuclear weapons, recent research has revealed disturbing evidence

indicating that risks of escalation and accidental or unauthorized use were far greater than is usually appreciated.² Consider:

- Top U.S. military leaders, in the mistaken belief that no nuclear warheads had been delivered to Cuba, recommended air strikes be used to destroy the missile sites, followed by an invasion of Cuba.
- Authorization had been given to Soviet commanders in Cuba to use tactical nuclear weapons in the event of a U.S. invasion. These warheads, which lacked control devices to prevent unauthorized use, were dispersed during the crisis to reduce their vulnerability to a U.S. attack. The longer-range missiles and their warheads also lacked use controls, opening up the possibility that Soviet commanders in Cuba could have launched a nuclear attack against the United States.
- Castro and Soviet military leaders argued for a tough response to U.S. demands that the missiles be removed. Khrushchev initially ordered work accelerated on the missile sites, and ordered Cuban-bound ships to ignore the U.S. quarantine.
- At the height of the crisis, Soviet commanders in Cuba, acting on their own authority, ordered air defense units to shoot down a U-2 reconnaissance airplane. Later that same day, a U-2 on a routine mission accidentally strayed over Soviet airspace. Either act could have been interpreted as a calculated provocation by the other side.
- During the crisis, officers at Malmstrom Air Force Base jerry-rigged the launch system to give themselves the ability to launch their Minuteman missiles without higher authorization.
- During the crisis, the Strategic Air Command deployed nuclear warheads in nine of ten test silos at Vandenberg Air Force Base and then launched the tenth missile in a previously scheduled test, oblivious to the possibility that the Soviets might have been aware of the warhead deployments and could have confused the test for a nuclear attack.

² See James G. Blight and David A. Welch, "Risking 'The Destruction of Nations': Lessons of the Cuban Missile Crisis for New and Aspiring Nuclear States," *Security Studies*, Vol. 4, No. 4, pp. 811–850; Scott D. Sagan, "The Perils of Proliferation: Organization Theory, Deterrence Theory, and the Spread of *International Security*, Vol. 18, No. 4 (Spring 1994), p. 96; and Scott D. Sagan, *Moving Targets* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989).

- During the crisis, U.S. radar operators mistakenly reported that a missile had been launched from Cuba and was about to hit Tampa. Only after the expected detonation failed to occur was it discovered that an operator had inserted a training tape into the system.

Optimists apparently believe that the fact that war was avoided despite these mishaps shows just how robust nuclear deterrence is. This is somewhat like NASA managers who used the fact that booster seals had eroded and partially failed in earlier successful launches to justify the fateful launch decision to launch the Challenger:

There are several references to flights that had gone before. The acceptance and success of these flights is taken as evidence of safety. But erosion and blow-by...are warnings that something is wrong...The fact that this danger did not lead to catastrophe before is no guarantee that it will not the next time...When playing Russian roulette the fact that the first shot got off safely is little comfort for the next.³

To pessimists, the mishaps and miscommunications during the missile crisis demonstrate that deterrence can fail despite our best efforts to prevent nuclear war, and that the probability of such a failure is unacceptably high. Under somewhat different circumstances, with different political and military leaders, an attack on Cuba might have been ordered, a serious accident might have occurred, or an innocent event might have been misinterpreted as an act of war, any of which might have triggered the use of nuclear weapons. The fact that nuclear war was avoided in the Cuban Missile Crisis and the 1990 Indo-Pakistani crisis should be little comfort for the next crisis.

The Risks of Proliferation

Hagerty also claims that deterrence between “opaque proliferators” should be more robust than deterrence between the superpowers (pp. 86–87). This is difficult to understand, since the stability of deterrence usually is thought to depend upon having safe, secure, and survivable nuclear forces. The superpowers spent hundreds of billions of dollars to field a survivable nuclear deterrent force with thousands of nuclear weapons on submarines under the sea, bombers ready for take-off, and missiles ready for instant launch, and

³ R.P. Feynman, “Personal Observations on the Reliability of the Shuttle,” Appendix F, *Report of the Presidential Commission on the Space Shuttle Challenger Accident* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1986).

they took great pains to ensure that the means to command these forces would also survive an attack. In the case of opaque proliferators, the very existence of assembled nuclear weapons is in doubt; even more doubtful is the ability to deliver such weapons if they do exist, especially after an attack. How could deterrence be more robust in the latter case compared to the former?

Hagerty ascribes this counterintuitive result to the fact that the superpowers “embraced counterforce targeting strategies, which placed a high premium on detecting and responding hastily to signs of enemy attack” (p. 86), while proliferators have, without exception, embraced countervalue doctrines, which are more crisis-stable. I agree that, all other things being equal, countervalue strategies are more crisis-stable than counterforce strategies, but Hagerty offers no hard evidence for believing that India and Pakistan (much less any future proliferator) will always and under all circumstances forswear counterforce.

Hagerty attributes the stability of deterrence among proliferators to the fact that the “opacity” of their nuclear postures—the uncertainty regarding the number of nuclear weapons they possess, their location and readiness for use, and the plans that have been made for their delivery—makes successful counterforce and preemption implausible. He writes: “In opaque nuclear competition, there is simply no way that Indian or Pakistani planners could have confidence in launching an entirely successful nuclear first strike” (p. 110); and also: “In the event of a nuclear exchange, no South Asian leader can have any illusion that the use of atomic weapons would result in an ‘acceptable’ number of deaths” (p. 89).

Although no prudent leader *should* have confidence in the ability of preemptive or counterforce strikes to limit damage to an “acceptable” level, that does not mean that such attacks will not be planned and seriously considered during a crisis. The fact that U.S. and Soviet planners could not have confidence in the ability of counterforce strikes to limit damage did not prevent military officials from planning counterforce attacks. As late as 1961, the U.S. military believed that massive preemptive strikes “should permit the United States to prevail in the event of a general nuclear war,” despite the fact that they believed that “some portion of the Soviet long-range nuclear

force would strike the United States.”⁴ Some military leaders went so far as to *recommend* a preemptive attack, despite the fact that the Soviet Union’s nuclear capabilities at the time far exceeded those of India or Pakistan today. Without reliable information on the nuclear doctrines of proliferators, it would be unwise to assume that military officials in these countries will not also plan such attacks and recommend their implementation during a crisis.

Opacity could have a variety of effects on the stability of deterrence, many of which are negative. Uncertainty regarding the size, location, and readiness of an opponent’s nuclear force could induce caution, as Hagerty suggests, but it also could lead a nation to underestimate an opponent’s will or ability to respond, emboldening it to escalate a crisis or preempt. Enthusiasm among the U.S. military for preventive war decreased dramatically as the Soviet nuclear posture became less opaque, and the same could be said for the Soviet Union with respect to China. The risk of accidental or unauthorized use would be very low if an opaque arsenal is unassembled, but then the survivability of the force would depend critically on the inability of the other side to know where the components are hidden. Opacity could prevent the sort of scrutiny that is necessary to detect and fix serious shortcomings in the nuclear posture of proliferators. For example, the secrecy under which missiles were deployed to Cuba resulted in a number of serious mistakes, including the failure to adequately camouflage the missile sites. It is naive to expect that small, secretive units within military organizations with limited accountability to political leaders will on their own accord take adequate precautions to ensure the safety, security, and survivability of nuclear forces.

The most important differences between the superpowers and proliferators are found not in doctrine but in the numerous technical, political, cultural, and organizational factors that affect the likelihood of preemptive, inadvertent, accidental, or unauthorized use of nuclear weapons. From a technical point of view, first-generation nuclear weapons will be much more vulnerable to accidental detonations and unauthorized use, and proliferators will lack attack-warning and intelligence capabilities to reassure them that adversaries are not preparing an attack or to verify the accuracy of the limited information that does exist. From a political and organizational standpoint, civilian control over the military is likely to be weaker in proliferant countries, and this will

⁴ Briefing for the President, SIOP-62, quoted in Scott D. Sagan, “SIOP-62: The Nuclear War Plan *International Security*, Vol. 12, No. 1 (Summer 1987), p. 22.

tend to increase the risk of nuclear use.⁵ Military organizations are more likely to favor offensive operations such as preventive and preemptive attacks. In the United States, military organizations did not on their own initiative take sufficient precautions to ensure the survivability of forces and command and control, preferring instead to rely on a combination of strategic warning, preemption, and delegation of launch authority. In short, there are many good reasons to believe that the risk of preemptive, accidental, inadvertent, or unauthorized use of nuclear weapons will be greater for proliferators than for the superpowers.

Conclusions

In the world of political science, proponents of the “logic of proliferation” are in the uncomfortable position of defending a proposition that they hope will never be proven to be true; their position is, in Hagerty’s words, “empirically unsupported.” For this they need not apologize, however, for the only way in which fears of preemptive, escalatory, accidental, inadvertent, or unauthorized use can be verified is if nuclear weapons are actually used. When it becomes obvious to everyone that the risks of nuclear proliferation are intolerable, it will be too late to do anything about it.

Readers of *International Security* can learn valuable lessons from Hagerty’s review of the 1990 Indo-Pakistani crisis, but they should not see this case as reason to become complacent about nuclear proliferation or sanguine about the long-term risks posed by nuclear deterrence.

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⁵ Sagan, “The Perils of Proliferation,” pp. 74–102.