

The Iron Cage: Security Dilemma Dynamic Driving the India-Pakistan Conflict

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Abstract

This article discusses the enduring complexities of the India-Pakistan conflict and uses defensive realism to argue that the security dilemma is the main causal factor for over seventy years of unabated hostility between these two nuclear-armed South Asian states. The paper articulates this conflict and defends the defensive-realist security-dilemma mechanism with convincing arguments for endorsing this strategy. Applying Kenneth Waltz's structural realist approach and Robert Jervis's security dilemma analysis, this study shows how the India-Pakistan relationship encapsulates how anarchic international orders drive rational states pursuing security to create endless conflict regardless of regime, leadership, or diplomatic efforts. The study systematically analyzes five key cases from the 1947 Kashmir War to the 2019 Balakot Crisis based on realism's fundamental principles: Statism, Survival, and Anarchy. It explains how protective intentions are misperceived as hostile acts in ambiguous situations, creating a never-ending chain reaction where both nations become trapped in structural imperatives that transform rational thought into collective catastrophe. Using secondary sources including declassified documents, memoirs, and scholarly analysis, the study compares how fear, uncertainty, and action-reaction dynamics interact across different historical, technological, and geopolitical contexts. Findings show that ideological, identity, and domestic political factors are significant contextual influences on conflict types. However, the security dilemma provides the most succinct explanation for why wars recur, escalate, and prove difficult to end. This systemic disaster has persisted through partition violence, decades of war, nuclearization, terrorist provocations, and modern hybrid warfare, maintaining its fundamental structure of reciprocal insecurity while assimilating new technologies and transforming international systems. The author concludes that this theoretical framework offers important insights into dispute resolution strategies, emphasizing that approaches must operate within structural limitations to achieve stability, not merely solve immediate problems.

Keywords: Security Dilemma; India-Pakistan Conflict; Kashmir Dispute; Defensive Realism; Nuclear Deterrence

Introduction

The conflict between India and Pakistan is among the longest-living and most dangerous rivalries in the international relations that appears as a result of the Indian partition in 1947. This traumatic experience displaced more than fifteen million individuals, cost at least a million lives, and established decades of enmity between these nuclear-armed powers.¹ This has been marked by unremitting tension involving five major wars (1947-1949, 1965-71, 1999, 2001-02 and 2009), military crises

that have put the region on catastrophe's brink, and low-intensity conflict along a highly militarised border.² This competition was transformed into the possible threat to world in the 1998 nuclearisation process as both sides formed their nuclear doctrines increasing new threats of escalation, and thus increasing the risk of any subsequent conflict.³ These two nations not only spend billions on defence but also face massive development challenges. The major peace processes were cut short with new crises regardless of the numerous diplomatic efforts put in place. The war has outlived the dramatic international and internal transformations, the process of economic reforms, new policies and the cessation of the Cold War, raising the question of the roots of the conflict on a deeper level.⁴ Despite Pakistan's democratic transitions and India's economic liberalization, hostility persists, suggesting structural problems underpin the rivalry.⁵

Considering this longevity, this paper builds on structural realist argument about the continuation of the conflict that the India-Pakistan competition displays the tragic logic of the security dilemma in international politics. Given doubts about intentions and inability to distinguish offensive from defensive actions, these factors create action-reaction loops where defensive measures appear threatening to the adversary.⁶ It is based on contributions of Kenneth Waltz, who wrote about defensive realism, however; Robert Jervis and his writings on the security dilemma that this conflict is not necessarily about the failure of diplomacy or ideology, but the actions of two rational security-seeking states in an uncertain, fearful and ambiguous military capability world.⁷

India and Pakistan are caught in an iron cage of structural demands where each state's defensive actions appear threatening to the other, creating retaliatory cycles that leave both nations feeling less secure. This cycle that can be traced back to the very nature of the initial chaos brought about by partition and which has been adopted by subsequent crises has stood the test of time in the face of technological, political, ideological, and international transformation.⁸ The security dilemma paradigm can reveal precisely why this war is so fierce over the decades, despite other conflicts of the same issue being solved in other locations. The study is analyzed using three premises of three realist that form the core issues of the security in India-Pakistan:

- i First, statism assumes states as the key participants in the international politics, with India and Pakistan as unitary rational agents of performing national interests, even though there are internal complexities;
- ii Second, the dominating aim of survival is to bring both the nations closer to security and other interests, including economic prosperity and ideological bias, to the background; and
- iii Third, supranational authority is absent, which creates the state of anarchy and imparts incessant uncertainty about intentions and capabilities that causes states to act in the self-help dynamic.

These factors create the archetypal symptoms of the security dilemma: The atmosphere of anarchy, unclear intentions, indistinct offensive and defensive gestures, and spiral of action and reaction. Structural factors in the relationship between the Indian and Pakistan case have effectively made the defensive actions of either country into the seemingly threatening actions reiterated and reiterated, keeping the clash going irrespective of the leaders or the negotiations. It is based on the consideration of five major crises to derive the argument of the study by seeking a common security dilemma mechanism that will surpass the two countries before moving on to the method, theory, policy and conclusions.

Methodology

The theory-grounded process-tracing is employed in the present study in organized comparison of both temporal and technological context. This study employs systematic comparison using standardized analytical questions for case selection, enabling systematic analysis while maintaining contextual sensitivity. Security dilemma is realized under four conditions, they are; anarchy, uncertainty of intentions, indistinguishability of offence and defence and action-reaction spirals. The authors selected five cases as a way of providing diversity in the form of periods, technologies and severity of the crisis and the availability of reliable secondary-source material. The authors clearly make the following diagnostic conditions anarchy, uncertainty of intentions, offence-defence indistinguishability and action-reaction spirals out of the pillars of statism and consequently encode the indicators.⁹

To achieve analytical rigour a process-tracing identification of causal mechanisms is assumed, which seeks evidence at systemic, cognitive, decisional and behavioural levels.¹⁰ The study relies primarily on secondary sources due to classified documents' inaccessibility, inability to interview major historical figures, and availability of high-quality secondary literature. The analytical framework has structured coding system that is used to ensure that the theory applies in a systematic way to cases.

Literature Review

The amount of scholarly work dedicated to the India-Pakistan conflict is enormous; this fact speaks of its significance as one of the most long-lasting and threatening interstate conflicts in the world. It is a review of the important theoretical approaches to understanding the continued existence of the conflict as it attempts to locate and assess the contribution and weaknesses of the various approaches as well as locating its contribution in the light of these approaches. In general, Scholars have divided the literature into three paradigms that are predominant namely liberal institutionalism that emphasized on cooperation failure, constructivism that emphasized on identity and ideational aspects and internally diverse school of realists.¹¹

Liberal-Institutionalist Explanations: The Failed Promise of Cooperation

Liberal-institutionalist literature dwells upon the India-Pakistan conflict when it comes to the lost chances of collaboration and coherence. This perspective argues that the South Asian conflict persists due to bad institutions, absence of economic interdependence, and democratic failures, but not due to the structural barriers which cannot be overcome.¹² Particularly, economic liberals underline a deficiency of bilateral trade (under 2% of total) given the presence of the geographical proximity, when the tension between the political and economic rationale is situated over each other.¹³

Likewise, institutional liberals are also worried about the maladaptive activity of regional organisations, especially the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). They say that India and Pakistan are holding the organisation at ransom to their respective bilateral differences, unlike the success of the Southeast Asia Association of Regional Cooperation (ASEAN) in addressing bilateral disputes of its respective regions.¹⁴ The literature documents the numerous means through which political strains are an incessant source of restraining economic integration but this is but a manifestation of deeper structural forces that ensure that the cycle of enmity continues. However, the liberal explanations of limitations are so grave and may be illustrated by the Kargil conflict that occurred despite the presence of the past diplomatic interactions that assured peace.¹⁵ This finding implies that there are deeper structural forces which diplomacy can temporarily mask but never defeat; they show long-term behavioural conditions.

Constructivist Approaches: Identity, Norms, and the Social Production of Enmity

Constructivist scholarship is the opposite extreme of this, and claims that the secret of the India-Pakistan conflict lies in its emphasis upon what may be termed material causes and the social discursiveness of identities, perceptions of threat as the normative frameworks that perpetuate enmity.¹⁶ Constructivist scholars in this perspective emphasize that political discourse, education and cultural practices actively construct hostile identities instead of hostile identities being primordial given.¹⁷

Of special significance, the 1947 partition is significant to the construction of these identities, how it creates habits of enmity, which supply the current discourses. Scholars argue that the two-nation theory justifying Pakistan's emergence makes Kashmir a flashpoint of contested identities where compromise is immeasurably difficult.¹⁸ Specifically, although constructivist insights reveal the level of emotional intensity and resonance of the conflict, they do not explain the tendencies of escalation. In particular, the stability of identity constructions complicates the process of comprehending when and why escalations occur or why pragmatic cooperation occurs when identities are hostile.

Realist Explanations: Power, Security, and Structural Imperatives

The realist scholars have conflicting opinions concerning the interpretations of the India-Pakistan conflict. On the one hand, offensive realists, according to our vision of world politics, understand it as a mere rivalry in the hegemony within the region, which, in the opinion of offensive realists, is a pointer of the fact that the growing power of India compels Pakistan to counterbalance the growing danger.¹⁹ The offensive realist theory by Mearsheimer is founded on the premise that great powers are predisposed to hegemony in their area, and this motive is motivated by the anarchic nature of the international system to exploit the amount of relative power it can amass wherever possible. It is a theoretical model, which assumes that states will be compelled to seize any opportunity that they have to enhance their status. Its application to South Asia would predict the methodical exploitation of its material benefits on the part of India with regard to establishing regional hegemony alongside compensating counteractions by Pakistan in terms of rational behaviour against an ascending hegemon. But India is also exhibiting defensive security-seeking behaviour and not offensive power-maximisation as postulated by the theoretical framework of Mearsheimer in its pattern of restraint in nuclear crises like in Kargil and Balakot.

Contrarily, defensive realists highlight the reality that the two states are only primarily interested in security and as a result, creates a tragic security dilemma whereby defensive measure by one state is viewed by the other as aggressive. In this sense, geographical weak points intersect and compound the insecurity of one another and both the countries are stuck in a vicious circle of aggression. The security dilemma framework identifies the structural conditions with state behaviour and states that an iron cage traps India and Pakistan into engaging in a behaviour that they do not entirely want to do in anarchic restraints and is not wholly reflective of the rationality of seeking security under these conditions. In comparison, defensive realism expects security in an anarchic environment where uncertainty and lack of clarity in the relationship between offense and defense spiral contrary to the intentions of status quo.²⁰

A study of India-Pakistan crises confirms the latter, discovering the patterns of powerful defensive motives, as opposed to maximisation of power, and of escalating disputes as being motivated by misperception, as opposed to by grand-strategic calculation. The history of nuclear risk management subjected to doctrinal restraint and crisis management subjected to the nuclear umbrella fits more readily to this logic than organised hegemony that is pursued.²¹ Kargil conflict (1999),

Twin Peaks Crisis (2001-2002), and Balakot incident (2019) respectively demonstrate moderation in nuclear environment and competitive hegemony in its systemic advantage, respectively, and, therefore, the defensive logic of the security dilemma is more warranted to explain the patterns of behavior than the hegemonic competition model of offensive realism.²²

According to offensive realism, there is a systematic Indian hegemonic expansion including countering forces of Pakistani.²³ Defensive realism is however more parsimonious and falsifiable so that it explains the patterns of restraint not by ad hoc variables but by testable predictions about escalation processes rather than by general assumptions about power-maximisers. This difference holds significance because the more precise perception of the conflict dynamics directly inform the development of the effective practice of managing the crisis, particularly within the high risk nuclear circumstances.²⁴

Positioning This Study: The Security Dilemma as Primary Cause

To assist in evaluating the differences between these variants, this paper employs a systematic and selective process-tracing approach, here where much more support is given to the defensive realist, security-dilemma, mechanism during periods and during areas.²⁵ It is based on this that this paper falls under the defensive realist tradition, which holds that the security dilemma is the leading explanatory paradigm to the persistence of the conflict. As opposed to liberalism, which is a mistaken diagnosis of the factors that caused failures of cooperation, or constructivism, which is an inadequate explanation of how identities relate to structural factors, the security dilemma is a consistent way of explaining the decades-old and increasing hostility between India and Pakistan.²⁶ This discussion shows that the dynamics of security dilemma are not unique to any past but have replicated themselves in other settings and crises and are the foundation of the general narrative of the India-Pakistan rivalry. Similarly to the hedging policies of the ASEAN states in their approach to managing uncertainties with China, the India-Pakistan conflict also demonstrates how the reasoning behind defensive realism can be upheld by security spirals in the behavior of defensive policies operated in structural anarchy.²⁷

It is not a rejection of the knowledge of other theoretical traditions but a sign of how they are limited to the framework. Economic interdependence, and institutional cooperation are in themselves no longer than worthless, but security issues should be considered in the first place as opposed to potential gains. Identity conflicts are neither causes nor aggravators of security dilemma, but are important products of material insecurities. The policy choice is influenced by domestic political reasons but within the limits that have been set by the structural imperatives. Theoretical parsimony is maintained but a more complete image of these associations is created.

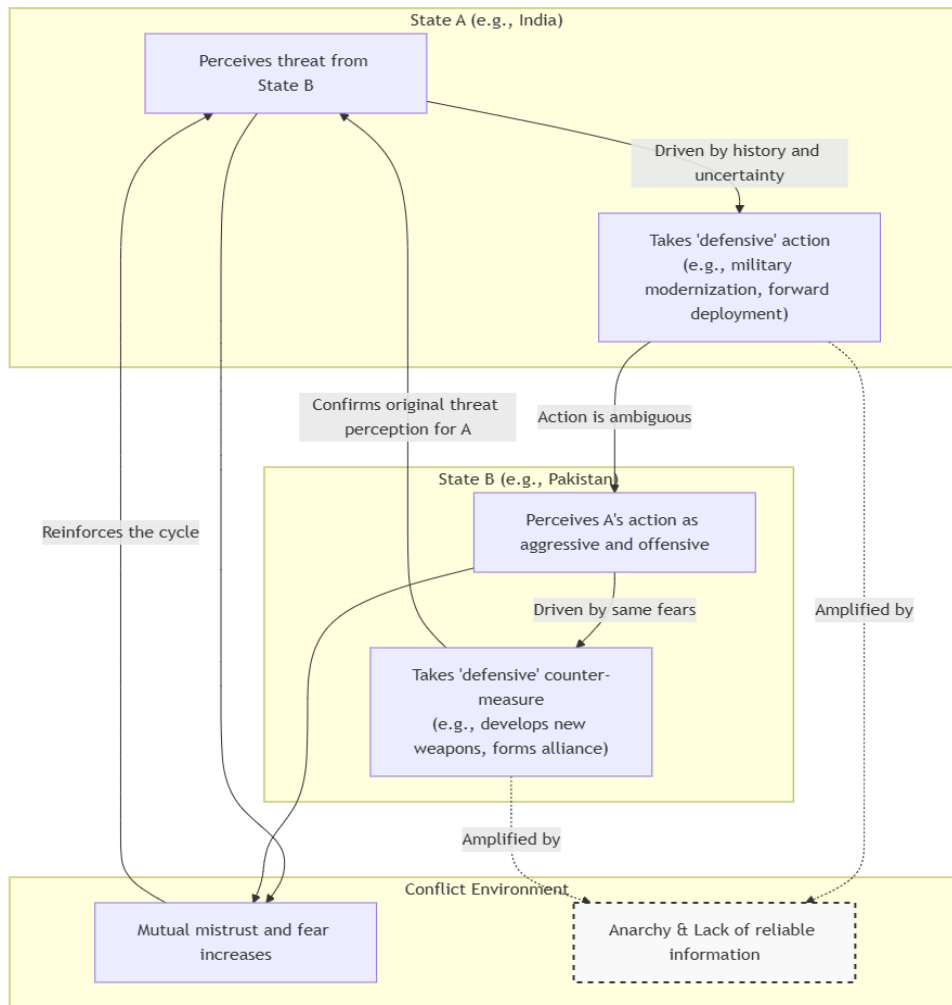


Figure 1: Threat Perception to Defensive Countermeasures Feedback loop that leads to a security dilemma between two states (India-Pakistan being an example)

Source: Waltz (1979) and Jervis (1978).

Note: This theory has been conceptualized by the authors based on the ideas that have been formed on the theories of defensive realists, Kenneth Waltz and Robert Jervis.

Four conditions that include anarchy, the indefiniteness of intentions, the inability to distinguish the offence and defence and the spirals of action and response perpetuate the cycle.²⁸

Figure 1 shows how security dilemma of feedback loops between Pakistan and India work as another State is perceived to be offending the other state by his or her defensive measures. This is the repetition of the pattern of how State A (India) perceives the menace in State B (Pakistan), and consequently engages in “defensive” military actions, which are threatening State B, which, in turn, responds by taking their own military actions which it considers as defensive. Such retaliations are in turn perceived as aggressive by State A and the cycle of threat perception and reaction re-embarks. This information poor and anarchic environment of the conflict situation enhances the mutual suspicion and leads to a downward spiral of insecurity where defensive motives produce offensive outcomes and where the state becomes less secure and less secure as each is only defensive.

Results/Analysis

The cross-case process-tracing analysis involving five important cases reveals similar patterns of security dilemma functioning which cross technological, leadership and international context change. Both of the cases indicate how actual security issues, which instigate defensive responses that appear threatening, precipitate action-reaction processes that make both states less secure. We discover good empirical support of the theoretical hypothesis that structural anarchy in combination with uncertainty and the fact that offence-defence is indistinguishable leads to self propagating spirals of conflict, which are hard to end.

Case 1: The First Kashmir War (1947-1949) - Genesis in Anarchy

India and Pakistan rivalry was a product of the violence following the exit of the British of the sub continent leading to the outbreak of such massive violence and displacement of millions of people during the partition process.²⁹ This disorder spawned the Kashmir conflict and Pakistan found itself based on the integration of Kashmir into India to be an existential danger that spurred the military activity. The Pakistani leadership was also overwhelmed by a sense of defensive response to Indian aggression as indicated by the Islamic majority character of the Pakistani society coupled with the proximity between the geographical location and Kashmir.³⁰ In order to achieve its interests, Pakistan supported tribal invasions in Kashmir and termed the act as people revolt.

Nonetheless, the Indian military response was of defence of their territorial integrity and a military war erupted which established a trend of reciprocal hostility, in a way, unleashing the security dilemma of defensive behaviour that became offensive on both ends.³¹ Confrontation had also become institutionalised in the form of the Line of Control (LoC) as a result of the war. The other side interpreted the actions of each other in terms of fear and suspicion and each state became a prisoner of a course of hostility and revenge that hardened the hostile attitudes against each other which would be a permanent feature of the future decades.³² Essentially, the threat perceptions were intensified by the anarchy and uncertainty in the Partition period; India thought that Pakistani support in infiltrations was defensive, India responded by making them believe the same, and institutionalised the LoC making both of them purely less safe.³³

Case 2: The Wars of 1965 and 1971 - Escalation as a Strategy of Entrenchment

The security dilemma was rooted with the traditional wars of 1965 and 1971 because they demonstrated how the defense motivations were leading to a course of escalation. The stability-instability paradox, and the ambiguity of offense-defense, under nuclear risk, are both captured by crisis behavior.³⁴ This war that started in 1965 was a consequence of the operation Gibraltar planned by Pakistan that was aimed at instilling a popular uprising in Kashmir.³⁵ India perceived this as aggression and was getting back with a huge military force which made the situation worse. But the two wars failed to achieve anything in terms of reducing mutual insecurities on the contrary they aggravated them. This response, by developing an Indian military deterrent against attacks in the future, gave the perception of Indian hegemony in Pakistan only to be countered by an escalation in the military of both parties with the aim of achieving greater hegemony over China.³⁶ The extension of the scope of the security dilemma was further enhanced by the 1971 war, whereby the Indian intervention on the matters of humanitarian crisis in Eastern Pakistan was explained by the need to save the lives. The perception of existential threat of this support by Pakistan is what led to pre-emptive attacks that led to the full-fledged war. This, naturally, led to the birth of Bangladesh, and additional fomenting of Pakistani

anxieties over Indian hegemony, accelerating its nuclear program.

All in all, the two wars were characterized by tragic nature of the security dilemma that was to demonstrate how defensive measures led to a feeling and deed by the other side that were mostly offensive and which added to the already growing hostility and mistrust and resentment in the strategic arena. As it can be observed, the same pattern was observed in all the five historical cases, Kashmir War of 1947, Balakot Crisis of 2019, and conventional wars, nuclear crisis, and grey zone/ cyberspace domain: (i) Defensive stance; (ii) Perception of Threat; (iii) Defensive response; (iv) Net security loss. This fact of consistency in technologies and leaderships indicates that persistence and not something that is transient is driven by structure.³⁷ Security dilemma becomes the central dynamic process that is sustaining the conflict despite the change in technologies and leadership in the nations during the period of the crises under analysis. To put it in brief, pre-emptive and limited inquiries were articulated as hegemonic efforts that led to mass counter-inquiries that further spurred nuclear interests leading to an escalation of insecurity.³⁸

Case 3: The Kargil War (1999) - Limited War in the Shadow of the Nuclear Threat

The Kargil War of 1999, which occurred despite the nuclearisation of the two countries in 1998, and the Lahore Declaration and diplomatic initiative, are examples of the nuclear era security dilemma.³⁹ The military forces of Pakistan occupied strategic positions of the LoC with the ambiguous boundaries. Nonetheless, India interpreted this as a major infraction that endangered the vital supply routes and retaliated through the use of air and ground retaliatory action. The Indian response in Pakistan felt disproportionate aggression to the Pakistani beliefs; this burdened the Pakistani anxieties of Indian hegemonic ambition in the nuclear shadow.

The constant, yet entailed stability-instability paradox was the emphasis put on the fact that nuclear deterrence does ensure continuance of war at the full-scale level and permits lesser conventional offensive in retaliation. US coercion has compelled the Pakistani retreat without any measures to solve the insecurities. The Kargil episode reveals how defence operations can be confusing in respect to the division of offence and defence, as well as perpetuate mistrust. This is contrary to what would be predicted in offensive realism, where the conflict is characterized by security-seeking behavior under nuclear threat rather than exploitation of systematic advantage, which confirms the predictions of defensive realism under uncertainty. This episode demonstrates that the nuclear risks were able to keep in check the spiral and at the same time strengthen the cycles of insecurity without resolving the structural conundrums.

Case 4: Twin Peaks Crisis (2001-2002) - Nuclear Brinkmanship

The 2001-2002 military standoff was the most extreme expression of the security dilemma in the nuclear environment, where both parties were on the verge of war. The crisis began in response to an attack on the Indian Parliament by Pakistan-based terrorist groups and the subsequent escalation of a scare situation within the country and pressure from international quarters for military retaliation.⁴⁰

Both nations mobilized their military forces, and tensions rose to unprecedented levels during this standoff. The Indian mobilisation was a pretext to force Pakistani compliance, and ostensibly based on self-defense against terrorism. Meanwhile, alleged threats to Pakistan's sovereign space led to counter-deployments of weapons with their own potential to further inflame tensions.⁴¹ The role of international actors, especially the United States, managed to temporarily de-escalate the crisis but did not tackle the security issues that were at the root of the conflict.⁴² This standoff strengthened the security dilemma's grip as both states shifted their doctrines toward limited war below the nuclear

threshold.⁴³ In conclusion, coercive mobilisation to induce compliance was not differentiated from preparations for attack; reciprocal mobilisation, nuclear alerts and third party diplomacy included escalation but did not overcome the underlying security dilemma.

Case 5: Balakot Crisis (2019): The New Normal

The first airstrike by India within the Pakistani border since 1971 was as a result of the Balakot crisis in retaliation against a terrorist attack targeting the Indian security forces. This precision of accuracy was a doctrinal change towards offensive military tactics under the nuclear deterrence to devise a new equation of deterrence.⁴⁴ This response was mirror imaging the anger that India felt at the hands of the preceding assaults and showed readiness to escalate conventional warfare measures against India in an environment that was very hot as far as social media and social pressure were concerned.

The reaction of Pakistan was a disciplined but considered military stance, as it attacked Indian military bases, but never instigated an all-out war in the nation, a sign of a clear realization of the nuclear history.⁴⁵ This event was a reminder of how the operational environment that the security dilemma is functioning in is changing where both sides are experimenting with red lines in incremental away and adjusting to the fast changing technology in warfare. The equilibrium between the traditional military conflict and the nuclear deterrence has produced fresh escalation pattern in the India-Pakistan antagonism. In short, accurate retaliation as a means of reestablishing deterrence required a weighted answer; doctrine was changed within the nuclear umbrella, and a new normal was arrived at in which tight conventional response under the nuclear mark.⁴⁶

Table1: Comparative Matrix of the Dynamics of Security Dilemma in Major India-Pakistan Crises (1947-2019)

Crisis/ War	Primary Trigger / Action	India’s “Defensive” Action	Pakistan’s Interpretation & “Defensive” Counter-Action	Outcome & Escalation	Core Dilemma Dynamic
1947-48 First Kashmir War	Accession of Kashmir to India following tribal invasion from Pakistan.	Deployment of Indian Army to defend Kashmiri territory and push back invaders.	Perceived India’s intervention as an occupation and a threat to Muslim-majority regions. Supported “liberation” forces.	Full-scale war, leading to the division of Kashmir and the establishment of the Line of Control (LoC). Solidified mutual enmity.	Territorial/ Geographic: Control over the strategic territory of Kashmir became the central point of insecurity for both nations.

1965-71 War	Pakistan's Operation Gibraltar: Infiltration into Indian-administered Kashmir to incite a local uprising.	Interpreted as a direct assault on sovereignty. Launched a full-scale military offensive across the international border toward Lahore.	Perceived India's massive counter-attack as an existential threat aimed at dismembering Pakistan. Rushed to defend its heartland.	Major conventional war, high casualties, and a military stalemate. Deepened the cycle of mistrust and led to major military buildups.	Military Escalation: A limited probe (Gibraltar) was met with a massive conventional response, demonstrating the offense-defense ambiguity of military force.
1999 Kargil War	Pakistani forces and militants occupy strategic heights on the Indian side of the LoC.	Viewed the intrusion as a severe violation threatening strategic supply lines. Used heavy air and ground forces to retake the territory.	Perceived the LoC as poorly defined and its action as securing its own position. Interpreted India's response as disproportionate aggression.	Contained but intense conflict with nuclear undertones. International pressure on Pakistan to withdraw. Reinforced the "stability-instability paradox."	Nuclear Shadow: The presence of nuclear weapons failed to prevent conventional conflict, and instead may have encouraged limited aggression under the nuclear umbrella.
2001-02 Twin Peaks Crisis	Terrorist attack on the Indian Parliament linked to Pakistan-based groups.	Operation Parakram: Full mobilization and forward deployment of its military along the border, signaling a credible threat of war.	Saw the massive mobilization as a precursor to a punitive, offensive war. Mobilized its own forces and raised nuclear alert levels.	A year-long, high-stakes standoff with a constant threat of war. De-escalated through intense diplomatic intervention, primarily by the U.S.	Coercive Diplomacy: The use of military mobilization as a diplomatic tool was inherently escalatory, as the threat had to be credible, making it indistinguishable from preparations for an actual attack.

Balakot Crisis (2019)	Pulwama terrorist attack: Suicide bombing by Jaish-e-Mohammed killing 40 Indian paramilitary personnel in Kashmir.	Airstrikes on alleged terrorist camps in Balakot, Pakistan, as a preemptive counter-terrorism measure to deter future attacks.	Interpreted the airstrikes as a violation of sovereignty and an offensive incursion. Responded with airstrikes on Indian military targets in Kashmir, leading to an aerial dogfight and the downing of an Indian jet, with the pilot captured and later released.	Rapid escalation to aerial combat, followed by de-escalation through international diplomacy and the release of the captured pilot. Heightened nuclear risks but no further conventional war. Reinforced patterns of limited actions under deterrence.	Limited Conventional Action Under Nuclear Shadow: Defensive counter-terrorism strikes were perceived as offensive, blurring offence-defence lines and risking miscalculation in a nuclearized environment.
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Source: Ganguly (1997), Kapur (2007), Narang (2014) and Hooda (2022).

Note: The authors made a compilation of various case analyses from historical data and secondary literature cited in the methodology section.

Episodes such as Kargil, Twin Peaks, and Balakot exhibit security-seeking under nuclear risk rather than systematic advantage exploitation, favouring a defensive realist interpretation.⁴⁷

Discussion

This discussion will analyze the long-standing India-Pakistan conflict in the context of the security dilemma that argument that the cycle of defensiveness leading to offense was present in five key instances involving the 1947 Kashmir War to the 2019 Balakot Crisis with the perspective of future crisis expected to occur. The findings directly answer the question posed in the study on persistence because the re-employed mechanism in all the cases is the systemic anarchy, uncertainty, and offence-defence indistinguishability, rather than the leadership or the regime change that sustains the competition.⁴⁸ This is a defensive-realism based framework that asserts that the anarchy of international relations necessitates the rational security seeking states to be involved in an endless standoff of aggression.⁴⁹

Theoretical Implications and Contributions

This discussion shows the multi-level operation of the security dilemma in which the state of structural anarchy results into all pervasive uncertainty, which compels states to engage in competitive behaviours. The framework is also at systemic, interaction, cognitive and domestic levels that exhibit impressive theoretical economy. At the systemic level, anarchy creates not only

inevitable uncertainties but also demands of self-help which cannot be completely overcome even by the efforts of diplomacy. The absence of the supranational authority compels both India and Pakistan to the worst-case planning because rational leaders cannot afford to make benign assumptions about the motives of the counterpart.

On the interaction level, offence-defence indistinguishability and geographic insecurities intensify security competition to an extent that it is higher than it may be suggested by pure material capabilities. The strategic position of the Kashmir valley that governs the important water sources and has potential channels of invasion renders it zero sum since compromise seems to be existentially threatening. Geographic proximity is known to bring about a paradoxical impact, namely, amplifying, instead of diminishing security competition, which generates compressed reaction times and shared strategic space whereby it inevitably becomes the case that defensive preparations of each state will seem threatening to the other. On the cognitive level, cognitive biases develop as a result of historical trauma due to partition violence and the wars that caused them, which makes people perceive more threat than objective sources. Both parties in decision-making operate and place under the conditions formed by their memories of betrayal, displacement, and existential threats, which are inherent to their ancestral histories. Such cognitive constructs act to screen the new information on the basis of the old threat schemas such that harmless acts appear evil and aggressive precautions appear preparative to hostility.

At the domestic level, institutional interest and the pressures of the people do not act out in the policy formulation process but act within structural limitations. There are institutional interests of military establishments in both countries to feed on the threat perceptions, but they exist because they are not contrary to structural imperatives. The pressure of democratic pressures towards hard line positions is grounded on quite real public security issues which have structural realities, not all of them made nationalism. What temporal consistency of security dilemma functioning over time-periods tells is, that it is a structural and not contingent phenomenon. Since the traditional warfare in 1947-1971, to the nuclear deterrence since 1998, and precision attacks against the same enemies in 2019, the same mechanism persists, even though military technology, the change of the field, and the international environment are revolutionized. This is the same as the key thesis of defensive realism according to which basic patterns of state behaviour in anarchic systems are determined not by factors on the level of the unit but by structure.

Grievances of history also enhance these perception of threat and necessitate a different way of handling the conflict, which goes beyond mere solving of a dispute. The findings are a very strong justification of defensive realist predictions about the behaviour of states in an anarchic environment.⁵⁰ The evidence that has surfaced in all the cases under examination demonstrates states as being security-maximisers and not power-maximisers and, unfortunately, the causes of the tragedy are in structural constraints, and not in aggressive intent. India and Pakistan do not always manifest revisionist designs or hegemonic designs, but would exhibit defensive designs, which are catastrophically interacting in the anarchic structures.

All of the cases that have been discussed demonstrate a way in which the perceived threats of real security may be misunderstood as threats and they can perpetuate an increasing cycle in which structural factors, without reference to intentions, dictate the behaviour of states.⁵¹ These interactions are met with a deep complexity owing to the nuclearisation of both states and this gives rise to the stability-instability paradox that can afford some sort of conflict whilst increasing the final stakes to potentially civilisational levels. Instead of Security which was conclusive as desired by both states, nuclear weapons created new possibility of competition as they existed in the fear of destroying one another.⁵² The new precedents of brinkmanship under the nuclear umbrella and the two parties are becoming accustomed to learn how to manipulate the gap between the nuclear threshold and

conventional restraint. The distribution of evidence is more conducive to the requirements of security seeking in defensive realism than is the conduciveness of systematic preying on advantage in offensive realism. Partaking Alternative Explanations.

Engaging Alternative Explanations

Security dilemma framework is the most appropriate framework that explains, in comparison with liberal institutionalism and constructivism, the persistence of the conflict during the various periods in history and technological circumstances. Liberal institutional theories correctly identify cooperation failures but misdiagnose causes by focusing on institutional structures rather than societal-level barriers that make cooperation practically impossible, not merely difficult. The manner of how institutional failures take place informs us on how they are subordinated to the forces of structure. The Composite Dialogue Process had not failed due to the institutional failures, but due to the fact that the Mumbai attacks were a catalyst to the security dilemma processes, which overwhelmed the cooperative force. The reason why economic interdependence is low is not because of the preference of protectionism, but because the state is more concerned about securing independence rather than being economically efficient in the trade relationships which may create strategic weakness that can be used by the adversaries.

Even though the institutional theories prioritize failures in cooperation, they do not necessarily take into account the structural facts that develop distrust and hostility. One such instance is the Kargil War in which the informal element of security relations could derail the diplomatic processes despite the well intended nature of the peace process including the Lahore Declaration.⁵³ Credibility problems of anarchy cannot be overcome by the economic gains and institutional commitments when the issue of security fears is present. Constructivism can be applied to describe intensity and emotional resonance, but fails to describe the time of escalation and precise crisis patterns. The nature of identity and articulation of threat are of immense importance to identity formations as they are essentially enacted within a structure and not the source of it. The facts indicate that even though identity discourses may provide the language of threat interpretation, they are accorded political salience primarily when they are provided on the background of material security issues. The two-nation theory and rival nationalisms were not created in the empty space, and they were created due to material disagreements in the possession of land and resources and physical survival. The issue of material insecurities influences conflicts of identity and the possibilities of establishing territory settlement is a challenge.⁵⁴ The level of identity-based hostility also moderates when the level of material security goes up temporarily as observed during the times of detente. Conversely, the growth of material threats results in the subsequent growth of the conflict over identity that strengthens the primacy of the structural factor compared to the ideational factor of conflict promotion.

On the same note, the hegemonic tendencies of the offensive realism are also systematically negated by displaying evidence of both states concentrating on defensive option even with expansion opportunities available to them. In case India had a desire to be the hegemony in the region, then why did it relinquish the territory of Pakistan after victory in 1971? When the problem is that Pakistan is a country of systematic revisionism, why has not it taken more vigorous measures in its attempt to reverse the status quo of the territoriality with the help of the nuclear weapons? The fact is that states never thought of expansion but security, and apparently aggressive actions were made under defensive reasons. It is always shown that states are security-maximisers and not power-maximisers, and the tragedies of structural constraints and not expansionist ambitions.⁵⁵ Conversely, the

neoclassical realism together with systemic pressures and domestic and leadership have been utilized to describe successful transitions to hostility to cooperation in other Asian contexts. The normalization of relations with China under Abdul Razak premiership is one such example, a self-protective response to structural uncertainty in the Cold War.⁵⁶ The inadequacy of such approach to long term nuclear tussles is, however, demonstrated by the conflict between India and Pakistan, where geographical weaknesses and historical trauma create a security dilemma that transcends the capability of domestic and leadership level factors to resolve and, thereby, reaffirms the usefulness of purely defensive realist approach to nuclear rivalries over the long term.

Methodological Reflections and Limitations

This study employs process-tracing approach, which reveals latent analytical issues of researching complex processes in the historical past, where motivation is controversial. The most appealing feature of the methodology is that it can establish general trends of behaviour when present in a variety of cases despite such attribution challenges, which indicate that it must have structural mechanisms, which are not tied to individual actor motivation. There are issues with strategic misrepresentation, though, as decision-makers are strongly motivated to style aggressive actions as defensive to foreign audiences and take the focus on offensive success back home to get the political benefits. The result of this dual audience issue is that official explanations are seldom good guides to real motives, and inference about real motives hence needs to be made based on the patterns of behaviour.

The evidence triangulation through a variety of sources is more likely to find, to show the patterns of behaviour in the various periods of history.⁵⁷ Nevertheless, the small amount of knowledge in regard to the deliberations of the state in its private form is a limitation to the literature that discusses the state action. This is because the patterns of behaviour are consistent in all cases and this contributes in further boosting a higher degree of confidence in the inferences of the theories regardless of the location of certain motivations which are under dispute. In the case of convergences of factual sequences but divergences of interpretations in the historical process in Indian, Pakistani and international sources, the pattern will always support the pattern of a security dilemma. In the future, archival materials that have been declassified and interviews with the elite should be considered to supplement the secondary methodology of this study. Hypothetical scenario analysis Although it is clearly hypothetical, this can be used to demonstrate the usefulness of the framework as a predictive instrument since here one can see how familiar patterns can be applied to a new one, with the China and new technologies.

Policy Implications: Managing the Unmanageable

The implications of the India-Pakistan conflict in the context of security dilemma are very important and they go against the traditional wisdom of diplomacy. When structural factors are among those underlying the persistence of the hostility, then the conventional approaches towards resolving underlying conflicts or fundamentally altering relationships will not only be demanding but may well be counterproductive by creating expectations that structural constraints cannot be transcended in terms of fulfilment. The analysis indicates that there should be diversified redundant crisis management processes: military communication hotlines that are not based on political relations, pre-agreed de-escalation protocols which can be triggered automatically during the crisis situations, and transparency mechanisms which will eliminate uncertainty without depending on trusting relationships between the adversaries. The crisis managements systems should be prioritized over the overall peace processes since the large diplomatic initiatives are leaving people anticipating and

subsequently disappointed too, and this disappointment re-invention worsens the relations.

History of agreements shows that small technocratic agreements tend to be more enduring than grandiose political arrangements due to the fact that they are welcoming of structural forces rather than contrary to them. An example is the 1991 Agreement on Prohibition of Attack against Nuclear Installations, which despite having a very narrow foundation has endured numerous crises due to mutually-verifying the agreement. Other comparable deals in cyber activities or space capabilities or missile testing could provide islands of stability. Indistinguishability in offence and defence would be alleviated partially by transparency and predictability of military postures by giving prior notice of practices, by agreements on the restriction of forces in sensitive regions and by verification of military defensive deployments. The uncertainty will be diminished by such kind of measures without the similar kind of trust that is impossible to keep during anarchy in a reliable manner.

The external actors must accept their inherently limited ability to alter the dynamics of the structure and their priorities of avoiding the worst and evading the most severe crisis. The American crisis management in 2002 and 2019 were the most successful ones as they succumbed without attempting to resolve the real causes of the crises. This model, which is characterised by high levels of involvement during a crisis, low goals based on de-escalation, and win-win solutions to both sides is not opposed to structural realities, but rather reflects it. Special attention should be paid to the potential destabilising effects of the technological advancements in the perspective of the potential destabilising effects that can be experienced in case the role of stable crisis management mechanisms and deterrence equilibria can be influenced. Cyber weapons, artificial intelligence, hypersonic delivery vehicles, and space-based assets create new offensive-defensive grey zones, which may cause unintended escalation through attribution problems and time-constrained decision making.

The Structural Tragedy's Human Costs

Although this is a study of the structural dynamics, the price of this iron cage to human beings cannot be abstracted. The fact that the security dilemma was being worked implies that the millions of people in South Asia were subjected to unbearable misery as the military expenditures occasioned by security competition took resources out of development in regions of abject poverty. Personal cost of both sides of the border have been millions with military spending causing the precious resource base to be diverted to development initiatives and the militarisation of Kashmir creating mass trauma.⁵⁸ It is the nuclear factor that elevates the level of the regional tensions to existential levels and studies indicate that even the small scale nuclear exchanges may cause disastrous humanitarian effects to the world through the global radiation, climatic upheavals, and economic downturn of billions of people around the world. The South Asian experience of the security dilemma is hence a dangerous risk factor to the catastrophe of not only the region but also the world, creating the necessity of controlling this structural tragedy, though with no chance of alleviation. The endless cycle of escalation and retaliation points to the necessity of efficient management that will be able to grasp the structural realities in solution, at the same time, trying to escape catastrophic conclusions in a sphere where a single miscalculation may entail a massive disaster.

Future Challenges and Theoretical Extensions

To counter the soundness of the security dilemma model and its predictive power, this section examines how familiarized patterns may be used in future events involving new actors and technologies. This analysis is not just a mere conjecture but rather based on the theoretical learning of

the past cases in a bid to pre-empt the potential pitfalls.

This hypothetical scenario is based on the empirical similarities we observed between the five historical scenarios (1947-2019) and, in particular, the inability of the security dilemma to be overcome by far more distinct technological and geopolitical circumstances. The fundamental dynamics of the past bilateral cases apply in the process of a 2025 crisis in the Karakoram region between India, Pakistan, and China in the future but some new factors introduce additional layers of complexity to the current security dilemma.⁵⁹ The situation suggests that the infrastructure investments made by China may make India fearful and increase the military readiness of the conflict areas. The strategic calculus of Pakistan would be to balance its interests amid emboldened India and enable projects of the Chinese who would seek to bring in strategic depth.⁶⁰ Emerging technologies and cyber capabilities are not only opportunities but also threats that are causing a confused perception, and increasing threats of miscalculation.⁶¹

With the uncertainty security environment intensified, they could also contribute to the already existing dynamics of security dilemma such as fear of each other, mistrust and a constant action-reaction cycle. This amplification is particularly conspicuous in those multidimensional cases that concern technological developments, and growth of power interrelations. Concisely, the use of trilateral entanglement and dual-use technologies would make the problem of attribution as well as the offence-defence grey area more ambiguous, raise the risk of miscalculation to greater lengths, and solidify the very nature of security dilemma. This hypothetical provides a clue on how structural imperatives can be modified to suit transforming geopolitical realities that once again brings into focus the necessity of initiative taking crisis management approaches. This hypothetical discussion indicates that despite the fact that the underlying mechanics of the security dilemma remain the same, they are manifested through multilateral affairs with new technologies requiring adaptive policies and better mechanisms of crisis management to prevent the structural demands that were present in the past in escalating into unmanageable conflicts.

Conclusion

This discussion has identified security dilemma as the best theories in explaining the India-Pakistan conflict that has remained an issue though the region has undergone dramatic changes. The authors present the transformation of defensive positions into offensive ones, and security-seeking into spiraling destructive competition through the analysis of five cases in history. Instead of a fruit of an unsuccessful diplomacy or simple hatred, this protracted rivalry is an outcome of two states that are in an iron cage of anarchic patterns that lead to undesirable behaviours. India-pakistan struggle shows that neither the traditional superiority, nor nuclear deterrence is a way-out of this trap and, on the contrary, they open new fields of development. It is possible to observe the security dilemma in the histories. The problem was worsening because during the state formation and uncertainty (1947 to 1949) fledgling institutions could not indicate intent. The military encounters like the one that was experienced in the years 1965 and 1971 had a predictable pattern of intensification. Even though nuclearisation induces stability in a strategic sense, nuclearisation also continues the stability and instability paradox, that is, one can take part in limited hostility and raise the overall risks. The emergence of new technologies in cyber, space, and artificial intelligence offers greater opportunities in the competition and threat.

Security dilemma is a superior theory as compared to other alternative theories, including offensive realism because it does not take into consideration restraint when structural conditions permit expansion. This way, grand peace efforts are actually counter-productive; time after time these structural factors dominate over diplomatic efforts. 'Compromises' remain elusive while both parties

view security through a zero-sum lens. Basic security worries are barely overcome by economic and cultural engagement though positive. An empirical answer is pragmatic management of crisis instead of conflict resolution as the second one supposes crisis escalation and unstable situation. Spirals can be contained with the help of mechanisms like transparency, long decision-making time and communication in the military. Specific risk minimization programs rather than grandiose peace systems are more realistic.

Even the outside actors should also reset their expectations. The institutional causes of the conflict imply that external mediation could only assist in controlling the conflict but not solving it. Interventions during crises should be de-escalation and subtle arms control in the new technologies are more viable than the solutions on a territorial basis. Considering that the risks will always remain, especially in Kashmir, people should manage the conflict effectively, even when the resolving process is not bound to happen. The ongoing and further militarisation and nuclear shadow are affecting human cost gravely. More studies should be done to explore how the security dilemma has evolved due to the emergence of India, China and the advent of technology. Such questions are not trivial questions because the stakes remain disastrous. The India-Pakistan rivalry is the tragedy of international relations since the two parties are mired in systems that have an unintended outcome. Even the common past and location is not sufficient to stop the looping point where defense measures become the danger. It is a realistic, albeit narrow-minded, objective to reduce crisis control and escalation management as the recognition of this structural tragedy and the stabilisation of situations in the region.

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