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# Use of Coercive Measures in Preventing Wars: A Focus on the South Asian Region

**Dr. Hrishikesh M. Bevanur**

*Associate Professor, Department of Political Science, Maharani Cluster University, Bengaluru, Karnataka, India*

*Email:hrishimb@gmail.com*

*Abstract*— South Asia remains one of the world's most volatile security environments, hosting two nuclear-armed states engaged in protracted rivalry and a third power whose strategic ambitions increasingly impinge upon regional equilibrium. This article examines how coercive measures — encompassing nuclear deterrence, compellence, economic sanctions, military signalling, and coercive diplomacy — have been deployed in South Asia as instruments for managing and, in certain cases, preventing the escalation of armed conflict. Drawing on Schelling's theory of coercive bargaining, Alexander George's framework of coercive diplomacy, and Robert Art's typology of force, the article analyses the Kargil War of 1999, the 2001–02 military standoff, the Doklam confrontation of 2017, and the Balakot episode of 2019 as empirical case studies. It contends that coercion in South Asia operates within uniquely constrained parameters, shaped by mutual nuclear vulnerability, unresolved territorial disputes, and the absence of credible multilateral security architecture. The article concludes that while coercive measures have repeatedly checked full-scale conventional war, their long-term efficacy is diminished by the absence of institutionalised communication channels, misperception risks under nuclear overhang, and the asymmetric motivations of state actors in the region. Policy recommendations for strengthening coercive stability through confidence-building measures and diplomatic engagement are proposed.

**Keywords:** Coercive Diplomacy, South Asia, Nuclear Deterrence, India-Pakistan Relations, Conflict Prevention, Compellence, War Avoidance, Coercive Bargaining, Kargil, Balakot.

## I. 1. Introduction

The South Asian subcontinent presents a paradox that few regions in the post-Cold War international order can match: it is simultaneously a zone of rapid economic growth and a theatre of persistent, unresolved strategic rivalries. India, Pakistan, and increasingly China in its Himalayan border dimensions constitute a triangular security complex (Buzan and Weaver, 2003) in which threat perceptions are deeply embedded in historical grievance, contested territorial claims, and competing national identities. Against this backdrop, coercive measures — understood broadly as deliberate attempts to influence an adversary's behaviour through the threat or limited use of force, economic pressure, or diplomatic isolation — have served as the dominant modality for managing crisis escalation without triggering general war.

The conventional wisdom in strategic studies holds that nuclear weapons have a fundamentally stabilising effect, creating what Waltz (1981) described as the 'crystal ball effect,' whereby the manifest dangers of escalation compel statesmen to exercise restraint. South Asia has partly borne out this thesis. Since India and Pakistan's overt nuclearisation in 1998, no full-scale conventional war has been fought between them, despite crises of considerable severity. Yet the region also illustrates the darker side of nuclear coexistence — a condition some scholars term 'the stability-instability paradox' (Krepon, 2003), wherein nuclear deterrence at the strategic level paradoxically encourages adventurism at sub-conventional levels, as each side gambles that the other will not escalate.

This article investigates how coercive measures have been operationalised in South Asia and evaluates their effectiveness in preventing interstate wars. It proceeds from a conceptual framework rooted in Schelling (1966), George (1991), and Art (1996) and applies this framework to four defining crises of the post-1999 period. The central argument is that coercion has been effective in arresting escalation in each case but that its effectiveness is contingent, fragile, and potentially unsustainable without structural improvements in bilateral and regional security architecture.

## II. 2. Conceptual Framework: Coercion, Compellence, and Deterrence

The literature on coercive statecraft draws a fundamental distinction between deterrence and compellence, a conceptual distinction introduced with enduring analytical force by Thomas Schelling in Arms and Influence (1966). Deterrence seeks to prevent an adversary from taking a specified action by threatening punitive consequences; compellence, by contrast, seeks to reverse a fait accompli or to induce positive behavioural change. Both rely on the manipulation of risk rather than the direct application of overwhelming force, and

both are exercises in communication as much as they are in military capacity.

Alexander George (1991) refined Schelling's framework through his concept of 'coercive diplomacy,' which he defined as the use or threat of limited force combined with explicit or implicit diplomatic demands to persuade an adversary to comply with one's objectives without a major escalation. George identified three essential conditions for successful coercive diplomacy: the coercing state must possess sufficient motivation; it must communicate a clear and credible ultimatum; and the adversary must perceive the cost of non-compliance as exceeding the cost of compliance. Where these conditions are absent or imperfectly met, coercive diplomacy risks either capitulation by the coercer or inadvertent escalation by the coerced.

Robert Art (1996) broadened the analytical frame by identifying four distinct functions of force: deterrence, compellence, swaggering, and defence. Of these, deterrence and compellence are most directly relevant to the South Asian context, though swaggering — the display of military capability for prestige and signalling purposes — also plays a documented role in subcontinental crisis behaviour. The concept of 'graduated escalation dominance,' wherein a state seeks to maintain escalatory advantage at each rung of the conflict ladder, is particularly pertinent given both India's and Pakistan's articulation of nuclear doctrines that rest heavily on escalation-control logic.

Economic coercion, while less theorised in the South Asian literature, has emerged as a significant instrument, particularly in the India-China context. Scholars such as Baldwin (1985) and Drezner (1999) have noted that economic sanctions and trade restrictions produce coercive effects primarily when the target state is economically dependent on the sanctioning state and when costs are concentrated enough to create domestic political pressure for behavioural change — conditions that are only partially met in South Asian bilateral relationships.

## III. 3. The South Asian Security Environment: Structural Determinants

Any assessment of coercive measures in South Asia must account for the structural features that shape their operation. Three factors are of overriding importance: the nuclear dimension, the role of non-state actors, and the deficit of regional institutional architecture.

### *A. 3.1 The Nuclear Dimension*

India and Pakistan conducted their overt nuclear tests in May 1998, formalising what had long been an open secret about their respective capabilities. Since then, both states have developed increasingly sophisticated nuclear arsenals, delivery systems, and doctrines. India maintains a declared No-First-Use (NFU) posture, though periodic statements by senior officials have cast some uncertainty on its unconditional character (Tellis, 2016). Pakistan, by contrast, has consistently refused to adopt an NFU posture, and its doctrine of 'full spectrum deterrence,' enunciated formally following the development of tactical nuclear weapons, explicitly envisages the use of nuclear weapons in response to a conventional military breakthrough on Pakistani soil (Narang, 2014).

The result is a nuclear environment characterised by asymmetric thresholds, ambiguous red lines, and limited institutional channels for crisis communication. The absence of a dedicated hotline between Indian and Pakistani military commands — in contrast to the direct communication channels maintained between the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War — significantly elevates the risk of miscalculation during crises. The 2004 agreement to establish a dedicated hotline between the Directors-General of Military Operations of the two countries has been only sporadically utilised (Chari, Cheema, and Cohen, 2007).

### *B. 3.2 Non-State Actors and the Coercion Problem*

A distinctive and deeply complicating feature of South Asian security is the prominent role of non-state actors, particularly militant organisations operating from Pakistani territory. For coercive strategy, the presence of such actors creates a problem of attribution and a problem of leverage. When a terrorist attack occurs on Indian soil, New Delhi faces the challenge of demonstrating Pakistani state complicity to a threshold sufficient to justify coercive action, while Islamabad has often sought to maintain plausible deniability. This dynamic was starkly illustrated by the 2001 Parliament attack and again by the 2008 Mumbai attacks, both of which triggered major military mobilisations without producing the behavioural change India sought from Pakistan (Fair, 2014).

The coercive leverage problem is equally vexing. Even if India convinces the international community of Pakistani complicity, punitive options short of full-scale war — targeted strikes, economic pressure, diplomatic isolation — carry uncertain deterrent value against a Pakistani security establishment that has historically viewed strategic depth through militant proxies as a core national interest (Hussain, 2010). The asymmetry of motivation identified by George (1991) as a predictor of coercive failure is prominently present: Pakistan's perceived existential vulnerability to Indian conventional superiority generates very high resolve to maintain strategic assets, making coercive demands on this dimension exceptionally difficult to fulfill.

### *C. 3.3 Institutional Deficits*

South Asia stands in marked contrast to other volatile regions — notably Europe during the Cold War — in the absence of meaningful multilateral security institutions. The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), established in 1985, has been effectively paralysed as a security forum by India-Pakistan tensions; its charter explicitly excludes bilateral disputes from its purview (Muni, 2010). Bilateral confidence-building measures negotiated since the 1990s, including the Lahore Declaration (1999), the Agra Summit (2001), and the Composite Dialogue framework, have produced limited and reversible progress, frequently derailed by crises attributable to non-state actors or unilateral domestic political pressures.

## IV. 4. Case Studies in Coercive Crisis Management

### *A. 4.1 The Kargil War, 1999*

The Kargil conflict of May–July 1999 constitutes the only limited conventional war fought between two nuclear-armed states in the post-Cold War period. Pakistani regular forces, disguised as mujahideen, occupied strategic heights in the Kargil district of Jammu and Kashmir, threatening the Srinagar-Leh highway. India's response combined military operations to retake the occupied positions with an intensive diplomatic and coercive signalling campaign directed at Pakistan, the United States, and the international community.

India's coercive strategy during Kargil was carefully calibrated to avoid crossing certain thresholds: Indian forces were instructed not to cross the Line of Control, and the Air Force was prohibited from overflying Pakistani territory. This restraint was partly a response to international pressure but also a deliberate signalling choice — New Delhi sought to demonstrate defensive intent while maximising the political and diplomatic isolation of Pakistan. The strategy succeeded in its primary objective. American pressure, conveyed directly by President Clinton to Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, contributed decisively to Pakistan's decision to withdraw (Tellis, Fair, and Medby, 2001). The episode demonstrated that coercive diplomacy can work in South Asia when a major external power exercises its leverage in concert with the military pressure exerted by the aggrieved state.

However, the Kargil conflict also revealed the limits of coercive deterrence. Pakistan's military leadership, led by General Pervez Musharraf, calculated that India's nuclear deterrent would prevent a major conventional response and thereby create space for a limited military fait accompli — a calculation that illustrated the stability-instability paradox in operational terms (Krepon and Faruqee, 1994). The very coercive restraint India exhibited to avoid nuclear escalation was the permissive condition that had made Pakistan's initial adventure seem attractive.

### *B. 4.2 The 2001–2002 Twin Peaks Crisis*

The December 2001 attack on the Indian Parliament by Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammed operatives triggered what became the largest military mobilisation on the subcontinent since the 1971 war. India deployed over half a million troops along the international border and the Line of Control, while Pakistan responded in kind. The standoff lasted nearly a year, during which coercive signalling — rather than combat — was the primary instrument of Indian strategy.

Operation Parakram, as the Indian mobilisation was designated, was intended as a compellent strategy: by threatening a massive conventional offensive, New Delhi sought to compel Islamabad to permanently dismantle militant infrastructure on Pakistani soil. The strategy failed to achieve this objective. Pakistan called what it assessed to be India's bluff, calculating — correctly, as it turned out — that the costs of full-scale war were too high for New Delhi to bear absent a further major provocation. The experience prompted India's military planners to develop the concept of 'Cold Start,' a doctrine of rapid-reaction limited war intended to achieve coercive objectives before the international community could intervene and before Pakistan had time to threaten nuclear escalation (Walter Ladwig, 2007–2008).

The Twin Peaks crisis illustrates two critical limitations of coercive mobilisation as a tool of compellence: the time cost of conventional mobilisation erodes coercive credibility, and the absence of limited, reversible escalation options leaves the coercing state with the unappealing choice between full war and de-escalation without political gain.

### *C. 4.3 The Doklam Standoff, 2017*

The Doklam standoff of June–August 2017 was a qualitatively different type of coercive episode, involving India and China rather than the India-Pakistan dyad. Chinese road construction in the Doklam plateau — territory claimed by Bhutan but of strategic significance to India — prompted Indian troops to physically block the construction activity, triggering a seventy-three day military standoff. China's coercive toolkit in this instance was primarily verbal and economic: official Chinese media issued escalatory statements, and there were implicit threats of economic consequences for India through trade relationships and multilateral forums.

India's coercive response was one of firm but restrained military presence, combined with calibrated diplomatic engagement. The resolution — announced on August 28, 2017 — involved both sides disengaging from their forward positions, though the underlying territorial dispute remained unresolved. The episode demonstrated that India was capable of employing coercion effectively against a more powerful adversary by exploiting geographic and strategic salience: the Doklam plateau's proximity to the 'Chicken's Neck' corridor connecting Northeast India to the rest of the country gave New Delhi high resolve, and this asymmetric motivation appears to have shaped Beijing's calculus (Fravel, 2019).

### *D. 4.4 The Balakot Crisis, 2019*

The killing of forty Central Reserve Police Force personnel in Pulwama on February 14, 2019 — an attack attributed to Jaish-e-Mohammed operating from Pakistani territory — triggered India's most direct use of force against Pakistan since the 1971 war. The Indian Air Force struck what it designated a Jaish-e-Mohammed training facility in Balakot, inside Pakistani territory beyond the Line of Control, on February 26, 2019. Pakistan responded the following day with air strikes that resulted in the shooting down of an Indian aircraft and the capture of its pilot.

The Balakot episode represented a significant recalibration of India's coercive strategy: New Delhi demonstrated that it would cross the international boundary in response to a major terrorist attack, breaking the implicit deterrent logic that had constrained India since 2001. The crisis was managed short of full-scale war through a combination of factors: Pakistani diplomatic signalling, including the offer to return the captured pilot Wing Commander Abhinandan Varthaman; American and UAE mediation; and the inherent costs of further escalation for both economies. The episode suggested

that India had established a new and higher coercive precedent, though its long-term deterrent effect on Pakistani support for militant groups remains contested (Basrur and Sullivan de Estrada, 2017).

## V. 5. Evaluating the Effectiveness of Coercive Measures

Across the four cases examined, several patterns emerge that allow an evaluation of coercive effectiveness in the South Asian context. First, coercion has been consistently more successful in achieving deterrence than compellence. The deterrent objective — preventing full-scale conventional or nuclear war — has been met in all four crises. The compellent objective — inducing durable behavioural change in the adversary's support for militant groups or territorial postures — has, with few exceptions, not been achieved.

Second, third-party intervention, particularly by the United States, has been a critical enabler of successful coercive outcomes. The Kargil withdrawal and the de-escalation of the Twin Peaks crisis both involved significant American diplomatic engagement. The Balakot de-escalation involved American, UAE, and Saudi mediation. This dependence on external actors introduces a structural fragility into South Asian coercive stability: the effectiveness of coercive mechanisms is partly a function of external powers' willingness and capacity to intervene, which cannot be assumed across all scenarios.

Third, the nuclear factor operates as a double-edged sword. Nuclear deterrence constrains full-scale war but also constrains the coercing state's freedom of action, enabling the target state to absorb significant coercive pressure without changing its behaviour. Pakistan's consistent ability to invoke the nuclear threshold as a reason for restraint — both on its own part and as a message to Indian decision-makers — has created what Narang (2014) describes as 'asymmetric escalation dominance,' wherein the first-use posture effectively raises the cost of India's conventional coercive options.

Fourth, domestic political pressures in both India and Pakistan periodically distort the rational-actor assumptions underlying coercive bargaining models. Electoral cycles, media environments, and nationalist opinion can drive decision-makers toward postures of public resolve that constrain the private flexibility necessary for coercive de-escalation. The management of the Balakot crisis, in particular, reflected the influence of the Indian electoral calendar on the timing and character of India's military response.

## VI. 6. The Role of Regional Institutions and Multilateral Frameworks

A recurring theme in the South Asian coercive landscape is the weakness of institutional mechanisms for crisis communication, confidence-building, and conflict prevention. This stands in contrast to the Cold War European experience, where the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE), NATO's internal communication structures, and the Helsinki Accords created an institutional infrastructure that, while imperfect, gave coercive signals a degree of credibility and interpretive clarity that South Asia lacks.

The existing India-Pakistan Confidence-Building Measures (CBMs) — including the 1988 Agreement on the Prohibition of Attack against Nuclear Installations, the 1991 Agreement on Advance Notice of Military Exercises, and the 1999 Lahore Memorandum of Understanding — represent partial measures whose practical utility has been undermined by the asymmetric commitment of the two states to their implementation (Chari, Cheema, and Cohen, 2007). The absence of a permanent bilateral security forum — akin to the US-Soviet Standing Consultative Commission — means that crisis communication depends on ad hoc channels whose availability cannot be assumed in moments of acute tension.

In the India-China context, the maintenance of Working Mechanism meetings for consultation on border affairs and the establishment of hotlines between military commanders following the Galwan Valley clash of 2020 represent modest but positive institutional developments. The Agreement on the Maintenance of Peace and Tranquility along the Line of Actual Control (1993) and the subsequent Border Defence Cooperation Agreement (2013) have established procedural frameworks for managing border incidents, though the Doklam and Galwan crises demonstrated the limits of these instruments under conditions of strategic competition.

## VII. 7. Policy Recommendations

The analysis presented in this article points toward several policy recommendations for strengthening coercive stability in South Asia.

First, the establishment of a dedicated India-Pakistan Nuclear Risk Reduction Centre, modelled on the US-Soviet centres of the Cold War period, would provide an institutional channel for crisis communication and reduce the risk of misperception-driven escalation. Such a centre could serve as a repository for agreed definitions of nuclear thresholds and signalling conventions, creating shared reference points for crisis management.

Second, revitalisation of the Composite Dialogue framework, with a specific track dedicated to sub-conventional conflict and the question of militant groups, would create an institutionalised venue for addressing the root enablers of coercive crises. The inclusion of Track II dialogues involving academics, retired military officers, and civil society representatives could supplement official channels and build the epistemic communities necessary for sustained confidence-building.

Third, the international community, and particularly the United States, the European Union, and China, should develop pre-crisis engagement mechanisms with both India and Pakistan that reduce the dependence on emergency mediation once a crisis has already begun. Early warning mechanisms embedded in diplomatic relationships with both states would allow external actors to exercise coercive leverage at lower levels of escalation.

Fourth, India and China should formalise the boundary management mechanisms developed incrementally since 1993 into a comprehensive Border Management Agreement that establishes clear protocols for disengagement, communication, and escalation control along the entire Line of Actual Control. The current patchwork of agreements is insufficient to manage the increasingly complex military postures both states are developing in the Himalayan border areas.

## VIII. 8. Conclusion

South Asia's strategic landscape is defined by the coexistence of nuclear arsenals, unresolved territorial disputes, non-state armed actors, and deeply asymmetric motivational structures that resist the clean calculations of deterrence theory. The coercive measures that have been deployed in the region's major crises since 1999 have succeeded, on balance, in their most important objective: preventing the outbreak of full-scale interstate war. However, this success has been contingent on factors — external mediation, nuclear restraint, and the inherent costs of escalation — whose continuation cannot be guaranteed.

The record suggests that coercive measures are more reliably effective as deterrent instruments than as compellent ones. Where South Asian states have sought to compel behavioural change — particularly on the question of Pakistan's support for militant groups — coercion has achieved at best temporary and partial outcomes. The asymmetry of motivation, the protective cover offered by nuclear deterrence to the weaker conventional power, and the absence of credible institutional frameworks for sustained engagement all militate against durable compellent success.

The path toward more stable coercive relationships in South Asia runs not through the refinement of military doctrines alone, but through the simultaneous development of institutional communication channels, genuine diplomatic engagement on underlying disputes, and the integration of South Asian security dyads into broader multilateral frameworks that can absorb and manage crisis escalation. Until such structural improvements are achieved, South Asia will continue to rely on coercive brinkmanship as its primary war-prevention mechanism — a strategy that, as the cases examined here demonstrate, has worked thus far but carries inherent risks that responsible statecraft must seek to reduce.

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