



Dissuasion and Confrontation: U.S. Policy in India-Pakistan Crises

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Introduction

Standard U.S. government definitions of "dissuasion" focus on influencing the behavior of potential adversaries in areas of military competition in order to advance U.S. interests and secure regional or global stability. The Joint Staff, for instance, notes, "Adversaries that perceive U.S. strategic deterrence efforts and operations as effective may also be dissuaded from militarily competing with us in certain areas" and cites missile defense as a possible example.^[2] Similar characterizations of dissuasion can be found in the September 2002 *National Security Strategy* ("dissuade potential adversaries from pursuing a military build-up") and various Department of Defense documents dating from the 2001 *Quadrennial Defense Review* (QDR).^[3] At first glance, the tools of dissuasion would seem to have little applicability to U.S. policy in India-Pakistan crises, where Washington is dealing with friends rather than adversaries and where the goal is to prevent or limit conflict rather than to head off a possible military competitor.

Over the past five decades, however, successive U.S. administrations have recognized the importance of stability in the India-Pakistan relationship ("the need for India and Pakistan to resolve their disputes" in the current *National Security Strategy*)^[4] and the United States repeatedly has used techniques that arguably are dissuasive in nature. The U.S. military, for example, understands that it "has been and will continue to be employed in crisis resolution situations across the globe" to head off confrontations or limit their impact: "The intent is to control or facilitate the control of situations through the application of military capabilities in concert with other instruments of national and international power."^[5] By broadening the aperture through which we view dissuasion to include friendly states in confrontational situations, therefore, we can add depth to our analysis of American involvement in previous India-Pakistan crises and discover guideposts for future U.S. policy initiatives in the volatile South Asian security dynamic. This overview is limited to the U.S. responses to the two largest India-Pakistan wars (1965 and 1971), the 1999 Kargil conflict, and the crisis of 2001-2002. The key themes are U.S. actions: (1) to prevent war in the first instance, and (2) to limit the scope of conflict when prevention has failed. Attempts to impose cease-fires or otherwise terminate wars once begun are not considered here as they fall outside the definition of dissuasion.

1965 Kashmir War

The 1965 war came at a time when the United States was not only absorbed in the Vietnam conflict and other Cold War concerns, but also weary and frustrated after nearly two decades of supporting or leading international efforts to promote India-Pakistan reconciliation, most recently in 1963, and after ten years of major economic and military assistance to both countries. As Secretary of State Dean Rusk commented subsequently: "[W]e in effect shrugged our shoulders and said, 'Well, if you're going to fight, go ahead and fight, but we're not going to pay for it'."^[6] The United States supported British attempts to calm tensions during the difficult summer of 1965 after Indian and Pakistani forces had skirmished in the desolate Rann of Kutch during April,^[7] and participated in the UN Security Council's vain attempts during August to bring about a cease-fire and restoration of the *status quo ante* when Pakistani infiltration into Indian Kashmir sparked serious fighting. In the Johnson Administration's eyes, however, U.S. influence was at an ebb with both sides, so Washington preferred to play its supporting role through the UN even after the Pakistanis launched large conventional forces (equipped with American weapons) across the Kashmir cease-fire line on 1 September. "Highest level decision here not to engage in direct pressure on either Pak[istani]s or Indians for time being, but to place primary reliance on UN," Secretary Rusk informed Ambassador Chester Bowles in New Delhi on 2 September.^[8]

The U.S.-backed UN initiatives hardly had time to mature before India sent its own troops over the international border toward Lahore on the 6th. With both antagonists fully committed to combat along the entirety of their mutual border, there was no longer a question of preventing or limiting conflict, and international pressure thereafter was aimed at bringing the two sides to the negotiating table, a process that did not bear fruit until the 23rd of the month.^[9]

The United States thus made little effort to dissuade India and Pakistan in the period leading to the 1965 war and its support of the UN failed to preclude the expansion of fighting beyond Kashmir. However, two aspects of American policy relating to dissuasion require further comment. First, Washington imposed an arms embargo on both belligerents on 8 September. As much of Pakistan's military hardware was of American origin, the embargo had a much heavier impact on Pakistan and probably contributed to the Pakistani calculation that its forces could not sustain the fighting much beyond mid-September absent U.S. spares and ammunition. The U.S. decision thus had the dissuasive effect of helping to curtail the conflict by promoting Pakistani acceptance of the UN-sponsored cease-fire. On the other hand, the United States probably missed an opportunity to dissuade Pakistani adventurism in the years leading up to the war and even in months following the April clash in the Rann of Kutch. Having acquired most of its weaponry from the United States and having received vague assurances of American support vis-à-vis India, many Pakistani leaders mistakenly concluded that Washington would come to their assistance even when they provoked a conflict by pushing thousands of infiltrators into Indian Kashmir and attempted to rescue this failed operation by opening the full-scale conventional assault on 1 September.^[10] U.S. Ambassador Walter McConaughy's stern attempts to warn Pakistan against using U.S. arms in a conflict with India could not penetrate this Pakistani preconception.^[11]

1971 Bangladesh War

Pakistani misperceptions and America's focus on geopolitical concerns also weakened Washington's dissuasive influence in the crisis period that preceded the 1971 India-Pakistan war. Pursuing the dramatic opening to China with facilitation by Pakistan, President Nixon and his National Security Advisor, Henry Kissinger, dismissed the bloody civil strife in Pakistan's eastern wing as a "Pakistan domestic concern"^[12] and directed the bureaucracy not to "squeeze" Pakistan.^[13] Nixon's warm personal relationship with the Pakistani president, apparent U.S.

acquiescence in military rule, and mild American official statements regarding the brutal Army operations in the east led many Pakistani leaders to believe that they could continue on their course of repressing Bengali discontent because the United States and China would rescue them should India intervene militarily—as seemed increasingly likely. The Pakistanis could only feel encouraged in this erroneous conviction when a bureaucratic oversight or misunderstanding between the Departments of State and Defense allowed the shipment of \$5 million worth of military hardware to Pakistan after an embargo had been declared.^[14] At the same time, the U.S. attitude toward Pakistan and the personal enmity between Nixon and Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi left Washington with little influence in New Delhi. Despite Nixon's nominal desire to do "anything—all we can"^[15] to preclude resort to war, however, the United States was unable to dissuade either side from its chosen policies and full-scale conflict erupted on 3 December after weeks of intermittent clashes on the frontiers of East Pakistan.

With the war in progress, the United States shifted its efforts to limiting the scope of combat. The rapid progress of the Indian offensive in the east quickly foreclosed any real prospect of preserving Islamabad's control over what soon became Bangladesh, but Nixon and Kissinger were concerned that India would continue the war until it had destroyed the Pakistani military and West Pakistan was "swept into the maelstrom."^[16] While encouraging Islamabad to hold on in the east (and thereby bolstering unrealistic Pakistani expectations), the U.S. Administration initiated steps to dissuade India from carrying the conflict any further into West Pakistan. In addition to direct pressure on New Delhi through diplomatic channels and public statements, Washington attempted to enlist Beijing in undertaking threats against India, worked to organize military assistance for Pakistan through friendly Muslim countries (U.S. aid having been cut off during the summer), and urged Moscow to restrain its Indian partners.

Furthermore, the White House directed the deployment of a U.S. Navy battle group to the Bay of Bengal. The Chinese demurred, the military help from other Islamic states was too little and too late, and the U.S. naval show of force had little if any dissuasive impact on decision-making in New Delhi.^[17] Washington's pressure on the Kremlin, on the other hand, apparently had some effect. Russian advice, coinciding with Mrs. Gandhi's own inclinations, seems to have been the crucial external factor in India's decision to implement a unilateral cease-fire on 17 December.^[18] Washington was thus only marginally successful in its efforts to confine the scope of the war through dissuasion. The diplomatic channel through the Soviets was important, but the Kremlin had its own reasons to commend restraint in New Delhi. The decision to dispatch the Enterprise, on the other hand, achieved little at the time and left an enduring scar that plagued U.S.-India relations for the next three decades.

The Kargil Conflict

In recent situations, U.S. dissuasion has been more effective. During the Kargil conflict, from May to July 1999, U.S. diplomacy was a critical factor in the Indian decision to limit the fighting to one isolated sector of the Line of Control in Kashmir. When Pakistani troops crossed the line in the early months of the year, India had the option of opening new fronts elsewhere in Kashmir or, potentially, along the international border with Pakistan proper. The decision not to expand the conflict horizontally or vertically was New Delhi's, but Washington's influence helped to reinforce Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee's preference for a limited operation to restore the Line of Control rather than open-ended war with the inherent potential for nuclear escalation. This new U.S.-Indian interaction during Kargil was founded on a relationship that had been painstakingly constructed since the early 1990's, highlighted by the intensive dialogue between Indian Minister of External Affairs Jaswant Singh and American Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott.

It was still a fragile and uncertain relationship in May 1999, but it gained strength during the crisis as the U.S. Administration clearly and publicly increased the pressure on Pakistan to withdraw its

troops, while carefully ensuring that India's leaders were apprised of U.S. actions and perceptions. At the diplomatic climax of the conflict, for example, when Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif was meeting with President Clinton on the 4th of July, the U.S. President telephoned Vajpayee several times to brief the Indian leader on the progress of the talks.[19] In its campaign to urge restraint on New Delhi, Washington was also successful in orchestrating approaches by other capitals, recognizing India's legitimate security interests but stressing the international importance of holding the combat to a limited, manageable level. Based on objective analysis and a conscious effort to enhance bilateral ties, U.S. support during the Kargil crisis was instrumental in introducing an unprecedented degree of trust and openness into U.S.-India relations.

The 2001-2002 Crisis

The improved relationship with India paid handsome dividends for U.S. policy three years later as Washington and the rest of the international community strove to help defuse the 2001-2002 India-Pakistan crisis.[20] In the tense atmosphere following the September attack on the United States, a costly October suicide bombing at the Kashmir Legislative Assembly, and the war in Afghanistan, terrorists assaulted the Indian Parliament on December 13, 2001 while it was in session, sparking national outrage and the largest military mobilization since the 1971 war. Though complicated by the importance of Pakistan to Coalition combat operations in Afghanistan and the presence of a small number of American troops in Pakistan, the U.S. Administration, in coordination with other governments, embarked on a diplomatic effort to dissuade India from engaging in military retaliation with unpredictable and potentially catastrophic consequences. Centered around personal diplomacy by Secretary of State Colin Powell and highlighted by presidential phone calls, the U.S. dissuasive campaign restored a degree of stability after a trip to the region by Powell in January 2002 and a conciliatory speech by Pakistan's President, General Pervez Musharraf.

Neither side, however, demobilized, and a brutal attack on an Indian Army family housing area in May brought the two countries to the brink once more. Personal diplomacy was again the centerpiece of the American approach: Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage both traveled to New Delhi and Islamabad in early June when tension was at its height. This time the dissuasive impact of the U.S. message was reinforced by public disclosure of U.S. casualty estimates in the event of an India-Pakistan nuclear exchange and a State Department announcement authorizing the voluntary departure of non-emergency personnel and dependents from U.S. diplomatic missions and urging other American citizens to depart or defer travel.[21] This combination of techniques had the desired effect, creating enough space for the two antagonists to back away from conflict once Armitage announced a Pakistani pledge to renounce cross-border infiltration into Indian Kashmir.[22] Hundreds of thousands of troops remained deployed along the border until October, however, and Washington remained focused on the potential for renewed confrontation. Indeed, Powell and Armitage each made yet another trip to the two capitals (Powell's third visit since October 2001) to stress the importance of normalized India-Pakistan relations. The crisis passed with successful state elections in Indian Kashmir in October 2002.

Conclusion

The record of U.S. dissuasion efforts in India-Pakistan crises is decidedly mixed, but examining it in detail highlights several points relative to future policy planning:

- First, personal diplomacy at very senior levels is the most effective tool in reducing tensions and promoting stability.

- Second, personal interaction at the highest echelons of the Indian and Pakistani governments must be supplemented by a carefully constructed public diplomacy strategy and integrated with economic measures.
- Third, Washington 's dissuasion is most effective in South Asia when it acts in close coordination with other key governments, particularly China, Russia, Japan, the United Kingdom, Germany, and France. Diplomatic approaches that appeal to Indian and Pakistani self-interest, that emphasize the unpredictable consequences of conflict, and that assist the two sides in finding alternatives to military action (including face-saving measures where appropriate) offer the best chances of success.
- Fourth, military forces, if employed, must be used cautiously and judiciously with clear recognition of potential long-term costs to U.S. bilateral relations and future effectiveness in the region. However, routine military-to-military interaction programs in advance of crisis can help shape the local environment to reduce the likelihood of confrontation and build solid bilateral ties to key actors in the Indian and Pakistani governments as an integral piece of the larger U.S. bilateral relationship with each nation.
- Finally, the significance of Washington's relations with New Delhi and Islamabad cannot be overstated. As shown most dramatically by the dialogue between the U.S. and India in 1999 and 2002, a robust web of bilateral connections based on trust and transparency provides the most promising foundation for potential U.S. dissuasion in South Asia.

Analyzing the U.S. role in India-Pakistan crises through the lens of an expanded definition of "dissuasion" thus illuminates the past and points towards future policy options. This brief review indicates that there is much to be gained from deepening the examination of the four cases cited above and from broadening research to include such situations as the 1987 and 1990 India-Pakistan crises.

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References

1. The views expressed here are the author's alone and do not represent those of the Department of Defense, the National Defense University, or any other U.S. government agency.
2. Joint Staff/J-7, "An Evolving Joint Perspective: US Joint Warfare and Crisis Resolution in the 21 st Century," 28 January 2003, 60.
3. [The National Security Strategy of the United States of America](#), September 2002, 30. Also see Department of Defense, [Quadrennial Defense Review](#), 30 September 2001, IV; and Department of Defense, [Annual Report to the President and to the Congress](#), (Washington DC: U.S. Government, 2002), 17-18.
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5. Joint Staff/J-7, "An Evolving Joint Perspective," 5 and 10.
6. Quoted in Dennis Kux, *India and the United States : Estranged Democracies* (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 1992), 239.
7. State Department memo for Secretary of State Rusk, 1 June 1965, in *The American Papers* ed. Roedad Khan (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1999), 11.
8. State Department telegram to New Delhi, 2 September 1965, in Kux, *Estranged Democracies*, 236. See also Dennis Kux, *The United States and Pakistan 1947-2000: Disenchanted Allies* (Washington DC : Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2001), 160.
9. Neither side expanded the war to East Pakistan, but this was a result of their own calculations, not any U.S. dissuasion policy.
10. Kux, *Disenchanted Allies*, 159-60.
11. Embassy Rawalpindi telegram to State Department, 30 April 1965, in Khan, 3-5.
12. State Department cable to Islamabad, 24 March 1971, in Kux, *Disenchanted Allies*, 186.
13. Nixon note, 2 May 1971, in Henry Kissinger, *The White House Years* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1979), 856.
14. Kux, *Disenchanted Allies*, 190-202.
15. Nixon statement to senior advisors, 11 August 1971, in Kux, *Disenchanted Allies*, 195.
16. Kissinger, 912.
17. Led by the USS Enterprise, this naval task force "was to scare off an attack on West Pakistan" and to "have forces in place in case the Soviet Union pressured China" (Kissinger, 905), while demonstrating U.S. support for China's allies in Islamabad at a time when Washington was trying to establish a new relationship with Beijing. See John H. Gill, *An Atlas of the 1971 India-Pakistan War* (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 2003), 64.
18. J. N. Dixit, *Across Borders: Fifty Years of India 's Foreign Policy*(New Delhi: Picus, 1998), 109-10.
19. William J. Clinton, *My Life* (New York : Knopf, 2004), 864-65; Strobe Talbott, *Engaging India* (Washington, DC : Brookings, 2004), 154-69.
20. In September the U.S. lifted the sanctions that had been imposed on both countries following their nuclear tests in 1998; and the U.S. renewed bilateral defense talks with India in December before the attack on the Parliament.
21. [State Department Daily Press Briefing](#), May 31, 2002.
22. State Department spokesman Richard Boucher referred to this as "President Musharraf's commitment to the United States to stop infiltration across the line of control permanently" during

the June 7, 2002 [State Department Daily Press Briefing](#). Among other Washington statements at this time, the President announced on June 5, 2002, "The United States expects Pakistan to live up to the commitment to end all support for terrorism" ([President Speaks to Leaders of India and Pakistan](#), Statement by the Press Secretary, White House, June 5, 2002).

About the Author

Col. John (Jack) H. Gill is a U.S. Army South Asia Foreign Area Officer on the faculty of the Near East - South Asia Center. Prior to joining the NESAC Center, he was assigned to the Defense Intelligence Agency as the Assistant Defense Intelligence Officer for South Asia from 1998-2001, including the 1999 Kargil crisis. During his time at the NESAC Center, he has also served as Special Assistant for India/Pakistan to the Joint Staff J-5 and as Military Advisor to Ambassador James Dobbins, the U.S. envoy to the Afghan opposition forces (2001-02). From August 2003 to January 2004, he served in Islamabad as the CJTF-180 liaison officer to the Pakistan Army, and has been following South Asia issues from the intelligence and policy perspectives since the mid-1980's in positions with the Joint Staff (J-5), the U.S. Pacific Command staff (J-5), and a previous tour at DIA. His publications on South Asia include an Atlas of the 1971 India-Pakistan War and chapters on current Indian and Pakistani political-military affairs in Strategic Asia 2003-04. He is also an internationally recognized military historian and has authored several books and numerous papers on the Napoleonic era.