

NUCLEAR ARMS CONTROL IN SOUTH ASIA: POLITICS, POSTURE AND PRACTICES

(Nuclear Arms Control in South Asia: Politics, Posture, and Practices by Zafar Nawaz Jaspal, Publisher: Paramount Books, 2024)

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Nuclear arms control in South Asia occupies a paradoxical position in strategic studies: despite recurrent crises and accelerating military modernization, full-scale war has been avoided since overt nuclearization in 1998. In *Nuclear Arms Control in South Asia: Politics, Posture and Practices*, Zafar Nawaz Jaspal examines the political constraints, doctrinal shifts, and technological developments shaping the region's arms control trajectory. The book offers a comprehensive survey of nuclear postures and crisis dynamics. This review argues that while Jaspal provides a valuable and empirically grounded account of the obstacles to arms control, his analysis underestimates the resilience of deterrence that has persisted despite recurring crises and modernisation pressures. Dr. Jaspal's central claim is that structural rivalry, entrenched mistrust, and the development of competitive forces prevent durable arms control arrangements between India and Pakistan.

Nuclear stability, in his view, remains crisis-managed rather than institutionally embedded. The expansion of missile capabilities, pursuit of ballistic missile defence, and development of tactical nuclear weapons are presented as trends that compress decision-making timelines and intensify insecurity. Arms control initiatives, therefore, remain episodic and reactive, lacking the political foundations necessary for sustained restraint. The book makes an important contribution by integrating doctrinal analysis with broader theoretical concerns drawn from deterrence theory. Jaspal effectively demonstrates how signalling ambiguity, force dispersion, and modernization generate uncertainty in adversarial perception. His discussion of Pakistan's development of short-range systems in response to India's evolving conventional posture, for example, illustrates how action-reaction dynamics complicate confidence-building measures. Likewise, the examination of ballistic missile defence debates underscores how technological asymmetries can exacerbate threat perceptions even in the absence of overt doctrinal shifts. Within the broader scholarship on South Asian nuclear stability, Jaspal's work aligns most closely with the "fragile deterrence" school, which emphasizes escalation risks, doctrinal ambiguity, and technological disruption. This perspective contrasts with scholars who argue that nuclearization has introduced structural caution and crisis management learning, producing a form of uneasy but durable stability. By foregrounding structural rivalry and modernization, Jaspal positions himself firmly within the more pessimistic camp.

However, the empirical record invites a more complex evaluation. The principal limitation of the book lies in its under-theorization of deterrence resilience. While instability risks are persuasively catalogued, the analysis does not sufficiently explain why deterrence has

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repeatedly held under stress. The 2019 Balakot crisis, for instance, represented the most overt cross-border aerial engagement between India and Pakistan in decades. Yet despite retaliatory strikes and intense rhetoric, escalation was contained within days. If modernization and doctrinal evolution inherently compress decision-making timelines and heighten instability, as the book suggests, then such crises should plausibly produce uncontrolled escalation. The absence of such an outcome requires deeper analytical engagement. Similarly, the development of tactical nuclear weapons is treated primarily as a destabilizing innovation.

While these systems undoubtedly complicate signalling and raise threshold questions, the book does not fully assess whether their deployment has altered actual crisis behaviour. Have these capabilities emboldened conventional adventurism, or have they reinforced caution by clarifying escalation risks? The analysis assumes destabilization but does not systematically test this assumption against observable crisis patterns. As a result, modernization appears as a linear pathway to instability rather than a variable whose effects depend on strategic adaptation and political signalling. This tendency reflects a broader analytical pattern in the book: structural rivalry is treated as an enduring constraint, but strategic learning and institutionalized crisis management receive comparatively limited attention. Over more than two decades, both states have developed communication channels, signalling practices, and calibrated response patterns that suggest a degree of experiential adaptation. The book acknowledges crisis management mechanisms yet does not integrate them into its core explanatory framework. Consequently, deterrence appears fragile by default rather than politically volatile but structurally operative. To be clear, this critique does not deny the risks identified by Jaspal. The absence of formal arms control agreements, doctrinal opacity, and nationalist political pressures unquestionably constrain stability. Moreover, modernization trajectories – particularly in missile accuracy and delivery diversification – introduce uncertainties that merit serious concern. The strength of the book lies precisely in its detailed mapping of these developments. However, by emphasizing constraints more than continuity, the analysis risks overstating systemic fragility.

The policy prescriptions advanced in the book- expanded dialogue mechanisms, transparency measures, and renewed confidence-building initiatives are normatively persuasive and strategically sensible. Yet their presentation would benefit from a clearer acknowledgment that deterrence stability may not be collapsing but rather operating within a politically charged environment. If stability is politically volatile rather than structurally eroding, then incremental arms control efforts may require reframing not as a rescue mechanism but as a stabilizing enhancement to an already functioning deterrence relationship. Despite these limitations, *Nuclear Arms Control in South Asia* remains a significant scholarly contribution. Its synthesis of posture analysis, technological assessment, and theoretical framing offers an accessible yet rigorous examination of one of the most consequential security dilemmas in contemporary international politics. For students and scholars of strategic studies, the book provides a detailed reference point for understanding how politics and posture intersect in shaping regional nuclear behaviour.

Ultimately, Jaspal's study underscores a central tension in South Asian security: the coexistence of enduring rivalry and sustained restraint. The region's nuclear order is neither fully stable nor on the brink of imminent collapse. Rather, it reflects a pattern of managed

volatility – where crises erupt but are contained, and modernization advances without triggering systemic breakdown. By illuminating the obstacles to institutionalized arms control, the book advances essential debate. At the same time, a fuller engagement with the demonstrated resilience of deterrence would have strengthened its explanatory power. The book, therefore, compels scholars and policymakers alike to reconsider whether the absence of formal arms control necessarily equates to instability, or whether deterrence in South Asia has evolved into a politically managed equilibrium that resists institutional codification yet persists in practice. In foregrounding the political limits of restraint, Jaspal reminds readers that stability in South Asia is not self-sustaining; it is negotiated under persistent mistrust. Yet the durability of deterrence over more than two decades suggests that rivalry and restraint coexist in a complex equilibrium. Recognizing both dimensions is essential for advancing a realistic and analytically grounded conversation on the future of arms control in the region.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the reviewer.