BOOK REVIEW


Air Commodore Zia ul Haque Shamsi

The book ‘Nuclear Weapons and Conflict Transformation: The Case of India-Pakistan’ by Saira Khan explores how introduction of nuclear weapons in South Asia has transformed the protracted conflict into an insolvable puzzle. The book is divided into two parts and ten chapters. The first part, comprising three chapters, deals with ‘Theory’ and the second part, spread over seven chapters, is written on ‘The India-Pakistan protracted conflict’. Keeping in view author’s vast experience and expertise of the regional affairs, this book appears to be a lucid narrative of the historical facts and incidents of distant and near past, with very sound theoretical base.

In her introduction, Dr. Khan states that studies revealed that the motivations for acquiring nuclear weapons derive from systemic, domestic, and individual factors, whereas the security was the primary driving force for most states’ tendency to proliferate. She is of the view that one of the most important reasons for proliferation — the existence of protracted conflicts — was ignored by proliferation scholars. (p-2) In other words, if protracted conflict states proliferate to enhance security through deterrence, how does that impact the conflict relations? Proliferation scholars never probed this significant research question, neither did conflict scholars. The book underscores the relevance of nuclear weapons to both war avoidance and peace avoidance. The possession of nuclear weapons by India and Pakistan has changed the pattern of the relationship between crisis, conflict and war in South Asia. The 1986-87, 1990, and 2001 crises substantiate the belief that serious crisis may not escalate to all-out war. However, those frequent crises during the nuclear period also confirm that peace between the two countries is unlikely. Peace initiatives, such as the Lahore Peace Process of...
1999 and the Agra Summit of 2001, could not prosper owing to the eruption of serious crises in the conflict setting. Among others, the primary policy recommendation of this study is that major powers need to create a propitious environment for states to terminate their intractable conflict. The transformed India-Pakistan protracted conflict could be terminated with the help of a facilitator, a third party; without this help, a congenial environment for conflict resolution may never be created by the two states in their frequent crisis-prone confrontations.

The Chapter-I titled ‘Studies on Conflict Transformation’ describes theoretical constructs of conflict management. Conflict management is a term used to describe a “situation where a conflict continues but where its worst excesses are avoided or mitigated. Conflict management would, in particular, seek to avoid or terminate violence between parties.” Thus, conflict management is often sought when some form of conflict control is necessary but complete resolution seems impossible. For example, peacekeeping forces can calm a situation and, thus, manage a conflict. However, such endeavours can never resolve the conflict but only provide temporary solutions (p-10). Conflict management is also often achieved by strategies of mutual deterrence. Thus, changes in the attributes of the participants can manage a conflict. The acquisition of nuclear weapons can be used to manage conflicts through deterrence. Dr Khan writes that this does not, however, resolve the conflict which is one of the primary conclusions of the present book.

Dr Khan refers to Charles Osgood's strategy of ‘Gradual Reduction in International Tension’ (GRIT), according to which 'one of the parties to a conflict announces its intention to take some conciliatory moves designed to reduce tension and then implements those moves. Words are followed by deeds. This is done regardless of whether the other side decides to reciprocate. The other side is invited to reciprocate and is likely to follow the lead of the first state, but the decision is entirely its own. Experimental studies agree that strategies like GRIT, which involve a series of conciliatory
initiatives taken by one side independently of the other’s actions, are more effective than strategies requiring reciprocation directly and immediately. However, Dr Khan points out certain deficiencies in that GRIT cannot be utilized for conflict resolution. It never spells out how and under what conditions it can be used to resolve a protracted conflict.

The chapter two deals with the theoretical constructs of ‘Ramifications of Nuclear Weapons Acquisition’. She is of the view that there is lack of scholarship on the implications of nuclear weapons acquisition for the conflicts that states are engaged in. Also, she highlights the inadequacies of studies in further protraction of a protracted conflict as a result of the acquisition of nuclear weapons. (p-26) She also dilates on the nuclear black market making a mention of Dr AQ Khan’s network, and quotes Allison who described it as ‘Wal-Mart of nuclear proliferation’.

The Chapter-III is titled as ‘Elucidating Conflict Transformation with Nuclear Weapons’. It is aimed at understanding as to when and under what conditions a protracted conflict moves to a level of almost indefinite protraction. Dr Khan writes that protracted conflict transformation is a function of the absence of war and presence of crisis, which are products of nuclear weapons acquisition by the states in conflict. She also explains the life cycle of a protracted conflict. (p-41) She further states that deterrence is the most attractive strategy for such states that are both weary and fearful of war in the conflict setting.

In Chapter-IV, ‘Life-cycle of the Protracted Conflict’, she writes that India-Pakistan conflict in the South Asia region stands out as one of the world’s intractable conflicts of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. She refers this conflict as a territorial dispute in which war remains a probability due to territorial aspects. Kashmir is a symbolic and nationalistic issue for the contending states. For Pakistan, acquisition of Kashmir is the completion of its identity, so this dispute is of a difficult nature. India regards it as a symbol of the ethos of secularism. (p-62)
She further states that the four crises in the nuclear period — the Brasstacks crisis, the 1989-90 Kashmir crisis, the Kargil crisis, and Indian Parliament Attack crisis — were all severe in terms of escalation potential. Most significantly, in seventeen years the two countries had four crises (the last in 2001). In contrast, in the pre-nuclear period, there were seven crises in thirty-nine years, of which three led to war. (p-71) Dr Khan is of the view that India-Pakistan conflict has not been able to move forward to reach the de-escalation and cessation phases. This means that it became frozen as the parties became nuclear states and for the stability/instability paradox dynamics.

In Chapter-V, Dr Khan argues that because a nuclear deterrent capability was the primary goal for both states, deterrence stability was desired and achieved at the war level, making room for strategic calculations and decisions, and creating a crisis-prone environment non-conducive to conflict resolution. The introduction of nuclear weapons into the India-Pakistan conflict had the unintended consequence of making the protracted conflict intractable. (p-76)

Dr Khan is of the view that the negative effects of nuclear weapons acquisition are real and have impacted the conflict. There are no extended peaceful periods due to the frequent eruption of violence short of actual war. Instead of bringing peace, the introduction of nuclear weapons to the India-Pakistan conflict has created a long-lasting non-peaceful environment.

In Chapter-VI, ‘Crises and Wars in the Pre-nuclear Period’, Dr Khan outlines that the rivalry between India and Pakistan has resulted in a total of eleven inter-state crises since 1947 to date. Seven of these occurred in the pre-nuclear period, 1947-86, whereas four of these seven occurred between 1947 and 1962, three between 1963 and 1978, and none during the 1979-86. (p-89). Dr Khan briefly explains the causes and conduct of wars and crises between India and Pakistan in pre-nuclear era. She concludes that three crises escalated to war
(in 1947-48, 1965 and 1971), whereas she declares the period of 1979-86 as the transition to nuclear weapons. (p-99)

In Chapter-VII, Dr Khan writes that India and Pakistan faced four serious crises in the nuclear period; none of which escalated to full-scale war, although each had the potential to do so. These crises were ‘Exercise Brasstacks in 1986’, the Kashmir crisis of 1990, the Kargil conflict of 1999, and the Indian Parliament Attack crisis of 2001. Two of these occurred in the post-overt nuclearization period. Khan quotes Samina Ahmed, who argues that “nuclear weapons played a major role in shaping Pakistan’s military strategy toward India in the planning of the Kargil episode and during the onset of the crisis. At the tactical level, Kargil was a typical limited probe involving a small, carefully controlled incursion along the LoC, in which Pakistan thought it would be able to reverse course if it met firm Indian resistance. However, in fact, the US pressurized the government of Nawaz Sharif to de-escalate as fast as possible. The possibility of a nuclear war made the Americans persuade India and Pakistan to end Kargil.”

Chapter-VIII, ‘Futile Peace Initiatives in the midst of Violence’ deals with certain bold overtures by Indian Prime Minister Vajpayee and President Musharraf of Pakistan. However, none could last long due to deep-rooted mistrust and enduring conflict. Dr Khan quotes Muchkund Dubey who argues that, “Solving the Kashmir issue has become more intractable with the possession of nuclear weapons.”

In Chapter-IX, Dr Khan writes that “India and Pakistan seem to be comfortable in the present situation of no war and no peace. Since stability is a function of no war and no crisis, and crisis still characterizes the conflict, the parties have become quite accustomed to the situation. They sense that wars are unlikely and crises and violence will continue; they are prepared to face low-medium-intensity violence and are unsure about the permanence of any peace process.” (p-128).

In Chapter-X, Khan reiterates that this book’s primary purpose is to demonstrate the negative ramifications of nuclear weapons acquisition for the India-Pakistan protracted
conflict. However, it also aims to highlight the salient roles of actor attributes and situational attributes in resolving the conflict. The purpose is to illustrate that a conflict is likely to become protracted when the two sides acquire nuclear weapons, a unit-level attribute, unless there is a significant change in an actor attribute such as leadership or political/economic capability, or in a situational attribute, such as third-party intervention in order to terminate the conflict. (p-141)

In conclusion, Saira Khan writes that “this book sought to expose the negative effects of nuclear weapons acquisition on conflict resolution. It made a causal connection between nuclear weapons acquisition by two warring states and the indefinite intractability of a protracted conflict.” (p-155). The book has argued that in the absence of nuclear weapons, a conflict usually reaches the cessation phase as a result of war, the traditional conflict termination mechanism used by most belligerent states in the world.

Khan concludes that her study ‘disproves the realist theoretical paradigm that states are more secure when they build up their military capabilities. The acquisition of nuclear weapons has not made India and Pakistan secure. Although at the strategic level they avoided war, serious crises erupted more frequently in nuclear period of the conflict, and each of these could have escalated, increasing insecurity. She contends that both India and Pakistan need to end their long-drawn-out conflict by finding ways to deal with the most important issue, Kashmir. Whatever the benefits of their current cooperation, leaving the central issue aside is not helping resolve the conflict.

Dr Saira Khan’s book is a well-researched and very well orchestrated academic work. She has done tremendous amount of work to gather the relevant theories to identify the lack of scholarly work in the field of conflict resolution of the protracted conflicts due to acquisition of nuclear weapons. This book is a much-needed exploration of when, and under what conditions, could a conflict transform to a level of almost
indefinite protraction. Saira Khan argues that with the acquisition of nuclear weapons by states in a conflict, the situation is transformed to a level of indefinite protraction. She maintains that such crises are embedded in each protracted conflict and that their escalation to war depends on the nuclear status of the adversaries. However, author ignores Pakistan’s legitimate security concerns due to non-resolution of disputes with India, particularly Kashmir. While asking India and Pakistan to resolve their disputes, she does not suggest any framework to do so when India continues to avoid resolutions of disputes of even smaller scale i.e. Siachin and Sir Creek.

This book is an analysis of how nuclear weapons acquisition can transform a conflict. It is a brief book and a bit theoretical for the general reader, but its conclusions will be of interest to everyone. This book will be of use to all students of strategic studies, international relations and security and is recommended for researchers, and professional collection.

**Book Reviewer**

Air Commodore Zia ul Haque Shamsi was commissioned in the GD (P) branch of the PAF in 1981. He has qualified National Defence Courses from Australia, South Africa and Pakistan along with Air War Course as well as Masters in Defence and Strategic Studies from Quaid-i-Azam University, Islamabad. During his career, he has served on various Command and Staff appointments in the field as well as at the Air Headquarters. He has been on the Faculty of Command and Staff College, Quetta. He is currently a Faculty Member at the AFW College, NDU. Air Commodore Shamsi is a recipient of Sitara-e-Imtiaz and Tamgha-i-Imtiaz (Military).