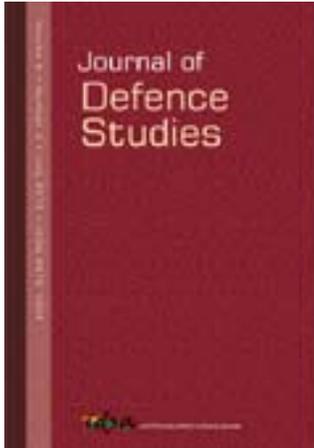


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Political Abstention in War and the Influence of Nuclear Weapons A New Research Puzzle

*Yogesh Joshi**

INTRODUCTION

Clemenceau's famous statement—'War is too important to be left to the generals'—represents an essential conflict in civil–military relations during crisis situations, especially with regard to the demarcation of boundaries for civil and military authority in the conduct of war. Where and when, in the conduct of war, should the political class step down and military commanders take over? Or, since, as the Clausewitzian dictum of war being a continuation of politics suggests, can war ever be considered a purely military enterprise? With the advent of nuclear weapons, these questions have become immensely important since military exigencies can now have extreme political ramifications.

The theoretical literature on the issue of the proper division of labour between the political and military arms of the state apparatus stands divided. For theorists like Samuel Huntington, the correct relationship between the soldier and state is one of 'objective control': the political class sets the political goals and the professional military sets out to achieve them.¹ The military should not interfere with the political process, and the political arm of the state should relinquish the conduct of war to military professionals. This is the standard model of civil–military interactions, also known as the 'normal theory' of civil–military relations.

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However, not everybody agrees with this logic. Eliot Cohen argues that operational matters are not divorced from political realities, and have political consequences²; therefore, to sequester operational matters from the purview of political decision-makers is neither possible nor should it be advocated. In fact, his research on political interference in military matters suggests that political meddling in the conduct of hostilities has a rather more salutary impact on the results of war than is otherwise thought to be the case. For Cohen, the best state of affairs between the civilian authority and the military can be characterized as an 'unequal dialogue' in which politics rule supreme.

This debate between 'objective control' and 'unequal dialogue' has played out in India as well. The 1962 debacle directed India towards the normal theory of civil–military relations.³ A tacit agreement came into being between the political class and the military for non-interference in operational responsibilities of the armed forces during the conduct of war. A conclusion was reached that the political leadership was best endowed with formulating the overall political goals for the military, and that this should just stop there. Positive results in 1965 and 1971 further encouraged this general perception, and so did the fiasco of 1987. Most academic writing on civil–military relations also attests to this model.⁴ Indeed, the military has been very supportive of this insofar as the claim on the 'domain of operational expertise' allows it to insist that 'politicians stay clear of its operational turf'.⁵

However, of late, some revisionist scholarship has started questioning the normal wisdom of civil–military relations in India. For example, Srinath Raghavan has argued that objective control has not served India's interests well.⁶ Not only were the lessons learnt from the 1962 war wrong insofar they resulted in a shift towards the normal theory of civil–military relations, but also the outcomes of subsequent conflicts—such as the 1965 war—were compromised because of an artificial division of labour between the civilian and military leadership. In fact, for him, 'the impact of the norm of civilian abstention on the subsequent conflicts... is perhaps the least explored aspect of Indian civil–military relations.'⁷ Scholars like Anit Mukherjee also believe that an 'autonomous military', along with two other characteristics of civil–military relations in India—'bureaucratic control without expertise', and 'the exclusion of armed forces from policy making bodies'—have had a 'deleterious effect on military effectiveness'.⁸

However, a scrutiny of the operational autonomy of the military under

the shadow of nuclear weapons has eluded even this rather refreshing scholarship on civil–military relations in India. A serious theoretical case can be made for considering a situation where ideas of ‘objective control’ and the ‘operational autonomy of the military’ might already be under challenge. And this is so not because a new consciousness is growing within the political class. Rather, it is the advent of nuclear weapons on the South Asian scene which is responsible here. The changing nature of conflict under the influence of nuclear weapons demand an active oversight of civilian leaders on all matters military, including the actual use of force and operational plans.

ENTER NUCLEAR WEAPONS

Notwithstanding the fact that the ‘norm of civil abstention’ has been under-researched in the Indian case, this norm of civil–military relations has also come under serious strain in the eyes of observers primarily because the nature of conflict has changed fundamentally under the shadow of nuclear weapons. A number of theoretical arguments support this claim.⁹ With the advent of nuclear weapons, there is a theoretical possibility that war has now reached its absolute extreme. As Clausewitz stipulated, if war should ever approach the absolute, it would become an ‘imperative not to take the first step without considering what may be the last’. Clearly, with such huge ramifications, even small details of war planning and execution cannot remain outside the political purview. The strategic and operational are now inseparable, since the consequences of operational requirements have huge political costs. Moreover, since the presence of nuclear weapons has potentially grave consequences, political goals have shifted from victory in battle to the survival of the polity, and the avoidance of annihilation. Clearly, these aims are not best served by a professional military whose singular aim is to achieve positive results in the battlefield by what Huntington calls the ‘management of violence’.¹⁰ Under the normal theory of civil–military relations, military professionalism is supposed to take care of the ‘management of violence’ so that the state’s ends are met. Under the nuclear scenario, the point is not to manage violence, but to singularly avoid it.

Lastly, the use of force carries with itself some balance of risk. In the world of conventional wars, this balance of risk was ameliorated by two factors. First, there was a healthy probability that wars could be won in a politically meaningful way. Second, even when defeated, the loss was not in the extreme; states could recuperate again. On the other hand, the

balance of risk in the presence of nuclear weapons is so extreme that even small military manoeuvres carry within themselves huge risks. Since the balance of risk always necessitates a political decision, war-fighting in the nuclear age is now as much a domain of the political as it is of military professionals.

Two other contentions also shed some light on the need for increased political interference in purely military matters, and these concern the idea of military professionalism. For Huntington, officer-ship is a profession, much like medicine and law, characterized by 'expertise in a particular area of human affairs, a sense of responsibility that lends an importance, transcending monetary rewards, to one's work, and corporateness or a sense of community and commitment to members of one's group.'¹¹ Huntington's contention for ceding space to the military when it comes to actual war planning and fighting derives from the professional nature of the military vocation. It is in the best interest of the patient not to interfere with medical procedures, and in the best interest of the convict not to guide his lawyer's defence. However, as Cohen points out, there are two problems with the idea of military professionalism.¹² First, unlike other professions such as medicine and law, the military class hardly involves itself in actual military practice—that is, fighting real wars—on a daily basis. They might train, equip and plan wars, but real action is always at a premium.

If this is true for conventional wars, it is even truer for conflicts that may involve nuclear weapons. If expertise has been the guiding principle behind the sequestration of the political from the military in the realm of war-fighting, there is not much of a case for military authority when it comes to planning and fighting actual wars in the context of nuclear weapons. The second problem emerges out of the purpose of the military profession. Unlike law and medicine, where the overall purpose of the profession is clear—saving a patient or a client—the military purpose is always determined by political necessities. These political necessities are dictated by the external as well the internal dynamics of a polity. However, under the nuclear shadow, one political purpose trumps all others: the need to avoid escalation to the nuclear level. And for doing so, the political class will—and should—adopt a proactive stance.

Clearly, there is a theoretical case for the increased participation of the civilian leadership in the operational conduct of war, courtesy nuclear weapons. However, the theoretical case for political willingness to interfere—stemming from the presence of nuclear weapons—in purely

operational matters in periods of conflict should not be confused with arguments pertaining to the claim that wars are less likely under the influence of nuclear weapons. I refer here to the so called 'more is better argument' of Kenneth Waltz or his progenies, popularly known as the 'nuclear optimists'.¹³ The argument being forwarded in this article is definitely not one of nuclear optimism. Nuclear weapons have not yet made conflict a virtual impossibility. States can still fight, in a limited capacity or even absolutely. During the Cold War, the great powers prepared for both—limited wars and a general nuclear exchange. Thus, the real issue is whether, under the shadow of nuclear weapons, the planning and execution of even limited wars can escape political supervision/interference.

What nuclear weapons have done is to make conflict, even in terms of its execution, a domain of political curiosity. Under the normal theory of civil–military relations, the political class would have left the execution of limited wars to the military. However, under the influence of nuclear weapons, the planning and execution of wars, limited or otherwise, cannot escape the gaze of political authorities. In simple words, the argument here is that, under the influence of nuclear weapons, civilian oversight of the operational components of war has increased. In other words, wars will still be fought; but they will not remain the exclusive domain of the military.

IN SEARCH OF EXAMPLES¹⁴

There is indeed some evidence which suggests that the coming of nuclear weapons has actually led to more civilian participation in the operational conduct of war or hostilities, otherwise considered to be the sole preserve of the military leadership. In other words, nuclear weapons have redefined the practice of political abstention in operational matters pertaining to the conduct of hostilities. This norm got embedded in the Indian system after the 1962 Sino-Indian war. In all, India has faced four crisis situations in the recent past which had a nuclear angle in varying degrees. If Operation Brasstacks and the 1990 crisis played themselves out under conditions of what nuclear strategists call 'existential deterrence', the Kargil conflict and Operation Parakram unfolded after both India and Pakistan had overtly declared their nuclear capability.

Indeed, especially after Operation Brasstacks, the political class has actively interfered in setting both the operational goals and also the limitations regarding how such goals need to be achieved. Operation Brasstacks was, in some sense, an eye-opener, with the political leadership

realising the fact that, in a nuclear environment, even routine, conventional military exercises can sow the kernels of a nuclear confrontation, and that all military activity needs to be duly supervised by the political class.¹⁵ But this realisation was post facto; nuclear weapons were hardly responsible for the resolution of the Operation Brasstacks crisis. As a matter of fact, Pakistan's nuclear capabilities were revealed only after the crisis was over, and Karan Thapar's interview of A.Q. Khan became notorious precisely because of this post facto realisation. Thus, Operation Brasstacks was the first major step, among many others, in the learning curve for the Indian political class as they understood the significance of nuclear weapons in conflict scenarios.

A counterfactual would also help to understand the significance of Operation Brasstacks in the operational autonomy of the military, especially when it came in to conflict with nuclear adversaries. It is indeed open to debate whether, in the wake of what happened during Operation Brasstacks, the Indian leadership would have allowed General Sunderji to airlift the Indian infantry to pre-empt Chinese aggression in Arunachal Pradesh. Operation Chequerboard, as the mobilisation was code named, became possible in some sense precisely because the political class was kept in the dark.

The evidence for the 1990 crisis is hard to find. However, most accounts analysing the 1990 crisis consider it to be the first nuclear crisis in the Sub-continent¹⁶, and second in the entire world. Unlike Operation Brasstacks, the compound crisis of 1990 definitely played out under the shadow of nuclear weapons—albeit how much influence these had on the decision-makers is open to question. Also, during this period, the V.P. Singh Government did warn Pakistan to 'stop supporting the freedom movement in Kashmir or face the consequences.'¹⁷ In another instance, V.P. Singh threatened to 'retaliate even if it meant war'.¹⁸ Thus, the questions which deserve further research are: what kind of options does the military suggest to the government of the day in order to stem terrorism from across the border, and how does the presence of nuclear weapons influence the government's weighing of these options? Even when threats issued by the V.P. Singh Government are to be taken as being merely rhetorical—that is, *sans* any substance—such line of enquiry is still a valid research question.

However, the 1990 crisis notwithstanding, the effect of nuclear weapons was certainly more pronounced during the Kargil conflict of 1999 as well as in the aftermath of the terrorist attack on the Indian Parliament in December 2001 (Operation Parakram). India's highly calibrated use

of force, even when the armed forces were not particularly happy with labour-intensive operations confined in a geographically disadvantaged locale, points to the same direction. The use of air power, in fact, came much after the Indian Army had appealed for intervention by the Indian Air Force (IAF). Though inter-services rivalry was partly responsible for the late employment of air power, the political class was also wary about the prospects of crisis—escalation ensuing from the use of air power.¹⁹ Even when it was finally deployed, the brief for the IAF was to remain within the Indian side of the Line of Control (LoC) which greatly compromised their capabilities.²⁰ Unlike the 1965 war, when India opened a second front to counter Pakistan's push in Kashmir, in Kargil in 1999, India restrained itself from expanding the war even when it meant fighting under heavy odds. However, they were restrained by the political leadership, which feared an escalation with chances of a nuclear exchange. In fact, former Army Chief General V.P. Malik's own assessment of the political condition not to cross the LoC does look rather grim: 'I knew that it would be (clearing the intrusion without crossing the LoC) extremely difficult and time consuming.'²¹

During Operation Parakram in 2001—India's attempt to exercise coercive diplomacy over Pakistan²²—operational issues became extremely important for the political class.²³ In hindsight, it seems that the political class was extremely wary of even the slightest movement of the armed forces, and was keeping track of all operational decisions while carrying out mobilisation under Operation Parakram. Such extensive monitoring of the armed forces under orders of general mobilisation cannot be explained without taking into account the effect of nuclear weapons on civil-military relations in India. In fact, the commander of the Second Strike Corps of the Western Command—Lieutenant General Kapil Vaj—was sacked for moving his men too close to the international border.²⁴ Thus, under the impact of nuclear weapons, operational exigencies, and tactics have become a new domain of civilian supervision. This kind of evidence, though somewhat sketchily presented here, suggests that a problematic puzzle exists, and which is valid enough to justify scholarly research into the effect of nuclear weapons on civil-military relations in the operational conduct of the use of force.

A counterfactual also demonstrates the logic of this exercise. This dimension of civil-military relations during war time becomes more pronounced if one starts comparing civil-military interactions during the 1965 and the 1971 wars, with some of the later conflicts/crises that have

occurred under the shadow of nuclear weapons. If during the 1965 war, as Srinath Raghavan has suggested, had the political class carefully probed the decisions taken by the military, the results may have been entirely different and much to India's favour.²⁵ In the 1971 war, on the other hand, as General J.F.R. Jacob has stated, the decision to take Dhaka was not taken in Delhi.²⁶ Rather, the initiative was taken by a more enterprising theatre commander given the unexpectedly limited resistance that the Indian troops encountered.²⁷ Such operational autonomy is hardly conceivable in contemporary times, and the advent of nuclear weapons may have something to do with it. At the least, the issue needs to be duly investigated.

THE CASE FOR INVESTIGATING CIVILIAN PRESENCE

Clearly, there is a strong theoretical rationale for the 'norm of civil abstention' to be challenged under the shadow of nuclear weapons, and the limited evidence adduced here suggests likewise. However, academic literature—whether it concerns the consequences of the advent of nuclear weapons in the Sub-continent or concerned with India's civil–military relations per se—has largely ignored this line of enquiry. The nuclear shadow over the Sub-continent led to an explosion of academic renditions on issues such as deterrence stability²⁸, instability–stability paradox²⁹, nuclear diplomacy³⁰, force postures³¹, doctrinal issues³², confidence building measures³³, and nuclear signalling³⁴, etc. On the other hand, the views of experts on civil–military relations, the issue of nuclearization, and the relationship between the civilian leadership and the military leadership have had consequences for deterrence stability. Most of the literature that delves into civil–military relations under the shadow of nuclear weapons is concerned with issues such as the position of the armed forces in India's nuclear decision-making structures³⁵, problems with nuclear command and control³⁶, and operationalization of nuclear weapons.³⁷ The impact of nuclear weapons on the operational autonomy of the Indian armed forces, and the civil–military divide over the conduct of armed conflict are subjects that remain highly understudied even when there are strong theoretical reasons for doing so as well as much empirical evidence available of the political leadership's creeping influence on the operational conduct of war.

One of the reasons for this dearth of academic enquiry—even when such issues are important for both the theory and policy of civil–military relations—is the lack of information. This is because of several reasons. Firstly, operational details are, by their nature, 'secrets of the state' and

are, therefore, hidden from public gaze. Secondly, the nature of the Indian state, which is extremely shy of sharing any information with the public. Lastly, the contemporary character of this research makes it harder to obtain any documentary evidence that could shed light on the issue. However, the prospects for research are not as bleak as they may seem in the first instance. The disadvantage of it being a contemporary issue is also, in a different way, an advantage insofar as there are a number of people who were/are involved with operational planning and execution who can be interviewed. Also, given the fact that there is hardly any work on this subject, even modest empirical attempts would count as new knowledge.

Thus, the impact of nuclear weapons on the operational conduct of war should be the new research focus of scholars interested in civil–military relations in contemporary India. Theoretically, as has been argued above, one should expect more and more participation and oversight of the civilian leadership in the operational conduct of war—a theatre hitherto autonomous to the armed forces. The evidence collected so far, though hardly conclusive, also suggests likewise. Thus, if one can actually observe political participation in the operational conduct of war as progressively increasing over a period of time after the advent of nuclear weapons in the Subcontinent, the question that arises is: how far can this political activism be explained without taking into account the effects of nuclear weapons on civil–military relations during wartime? This puzzle might be a new challenge for analysts looking at the changing nature of civil–military relations in India.

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2. Cohen, Eliot, *Supreme Command: Soldiers, Statesmen and Leadership in Warfare*, London: Free Press, 2002. Also see Lawrence D. Freedman, 'Calling

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3. As Srinath Raghavan's work on Nehru's strategic practice clearly shows, before and even during the 1962 war, the political leadership actively engaged in defining operational goals for the Indian military. However, Raghavan believes that the reason for this was as much the clout of Nehru as the lack of leadership and vision in the military high command. See Srinath Raghavan, *War and Peace in Modern India*, Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2010.
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 12. The evidence suggested in this article is hardly conclusive. The intention is not to provide a definite proof for increasing the political role in the operational dimension of conflict under the shadow of nuclear weapons. Rather, it is to demonstrate that there exists a theoretical hypothesis which is supported by limited empirical evidence which is open to more comprehensive empirical

investigation. Methodologically, there is a lot of difference in using evidence for purposes of conclusive proof on the one hand, and using evidence to show that one's theoretical hinge (hypothesis) might have some empirical relevance on the other. The task in this piece is the latter.

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18. Ibid.
19. According to General Malik's account, 'When the VCOAS, Lieutenant General Chandra Shekhar, sought the use of Indian Air Force, the CCS rejected his proposal'. See Ved Prakash Malik, *Kargil War: From Surprise to Victory*, New Delhi: Harper Collins, 2006, p. 116.
20. In fact, in the CCS meeting of 24 May 1999, when the decision to employ the Air Force was finally taken, both Jaswant Singh and Brajesh Mishra categorically stated the need to operate within the Indian side of the LoC (cf. Malik, *Kargil War: From Surprise to Victory*, p. 126).
21. Ibid., p. 119. Malik's writings also suggests that, from the very start of the conflict, he 'discussed the need for enlarging the scope of the fighting and for carrying joint services planning' (p. 121). Also, during a meeting with Chiefs of Staff of the Navy and the Air Force on 23 May 1999, Malik suggested to the other chiefs that they should jointly prepare for a (general) war (p. 122). In fact, in the CCS meeting the next day, the Army Chief suggested that war preparations must be undertaken immediately.
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