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14. ABSTRACT Most scholarly and journalistic articles looking at the U.S.-Pakistan relationship focus their attention on how the U.S. should compete with China for continued influence over Pakistan, essentially skipping the question of if it should compete, at least economically, with the PRC. This paper contends it is time for the U.S. to largely disengage with Pakistan and expend its finite economic, military, and political capital elsewhere. It should refuse to turn the spigot back on unless Pakistan's elite undertake serious economic, governance, and policy reforms. Even in this scenario, it should not attempt to compete directly with the PRC dollar for dollar in a competition for influence.					
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Why The U.S. Shouldn't Try and Compete Economically with China for Influence in Pakistan

INTRODUCTION

In the wake of the disastrous U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan and the triumph of the Taliban over the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GIROA), one of the most pressing questions for U.S. policymakers is the future of the U.S.-Pakistan relationship. The U.S. and Pakistan maintained a strong, if fractious, relationship since its founding, particularly through the height of the Cold War. However, U.S. objectives and interests in Afghanistan had been the focal point of that relationship since the Soviet invasion in late 1979. Adding to the complexity and urgency of this question is the increased economic investment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) into Pakistan, particularly in the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), as part of the larger PRC Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). This has given rise to fears that the U.S. may be ceding influence over Pakistan to the PRC.

Most scholarly and journalistic articles on this subject focus their attention on how the U.S. should compete with China for continued influence over Pakistan, essentially skipping the question of if it *should* compete with the PRC. For the reasons laid out below, it is time for the U.S. to largely disengage with Pakistan and expend its finite economic, military, and political capital elsewhere. It should refuse to turn the spigot back on unless Pakistan's elite undertake serious economic, governance, and policy reforms. Even in this scenario, it should not attempt to compete directly with the PRC dollar for dollar in a competition for influence.

This paper will give a brief overview of the history of the relationships between Pakistan and both the U.S. and the PRC, respectively, to provide context. I contend that the U.S. should expend capital on Pakistan only to the absolute minimum necessary to prevent a failed nuclear state, and even then, on almost exclusively counter-terrorism intel exchanges, trade development,

and limited, bespoke development/disaster relief aid. The three primary reasons for this are 1. because Pakistan has always been a faithless and duplicitous partner to the U.S, a condition unlikely to change in the near term; 2. because the U.S. is unable to match China in terms of direct economic engagement, and perhaps most importantly, 3. the U.S. has little remaining vital strategic interests, shared cultural ties or worldview with Pakistan, and paradoxically, actually may have interest in China bogging itself down economically and politically in Pakistan. I will then address and rebut a counterargument to this thesis and conclude with recommendations for a minimal engagement strategy with Pakistan moving forward.

BACKGROUND

U.S-Pakistan Relations¹

The U.S. relationship with Pakistan was predicated mainly on each country's security concerns from the creation of the Pakistan state in 1947, the former with the Soviet Union and the latter with India. Despite starting and losing multiple wars, Pakistan maintained a generally close position with the United States due in part to India's commitment to nonalignment (and drift toward the Soviet Union) and Pakistan's seemingly staunch anti-communist position while in close geographic proximity to the two strongest communist nations on earth.² However, the relationship ebbed and flowed during Pakistan's initiated wars, its close ties to the PRC (which helped enable the U.S.-Chinese diplomatic thaw), and U.S.-imposed sanctions over nuclear weapons. The relationship deepened when the two states concerted to support anti-Soviet mujahadeen fighters in Afghanistan in the 1980s. The relationship cooled following the Soviet withdrawal and subsequent collapse of the Union, particularly once Pakistan declared itself a

¹ This and the next section will discuss the history of this relationship in the broadest of brushstrokes in order to provide context. Specific, salient points facts will be raised in the argument section of the paper.

² Stephen P. Cohen, *The Idea of Pakistan* (Washington, D.C: Brookings Institution Press, 2004), 302.

nuclear state. However, they revived significantly following the 9-11 attacks and the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan, resulting in tens of billions of dollars of U.S. aid and military equipment in the 20 years following the invasion.

PRC-Pakistan Relations

The PRC/Pakistan relationship is, and has always been, a marriage of convenience predicated on their shared rival (India) and, to a lesser extent, the Soviet Union, rather than ideological, cultural, political, historical, or religious ties.³ This relationship was created and persisted despite sharp differences, in some cases diametric positions, in all these areas. Though never treaty allies, the two sides fostered a relationship in the context of the India-Pakistan wars and the 1962 Sino-Indian War. Following the 1971 war, resulting in the bifurcation of Pakistan, China secretly and critically supported the development of Pakistan's nuclear and missile programs. These military and security ties continued, but in the 2010s, evolved significantly with the CPEC and the billions of U.S. dollars' worth of investment and infrastructure they entailed. Pakistan still regularly refers to China as its "all-weather friend," implicitly implying the U.S. is the "fair-weather friend" whose support came with conditions.

Pakistan: Always a Faithless Partner

The first reason the U.S. should limit its engagement with Pakistan is that Pakistan has nearly always been a faithless and duplicitous partner who acted in interests counter to those of the United States while demanding and receiving military and economic aid. This is not to say that Pakistan never supported U.S. efforts or interests; the provision of U.N. peacekeeping troops, most famously in Somalia, is just one example. However, on balance, Pakistan has been an unfaithful and dishonest partner. The two primary areas where this duplicity manifest was

³ Andrew Small, *The China-Pakistan Axis: Asia's New Geopolitics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).

Pakistan's clandestine and covert support of terrorist networks and its nuclear program procurement and proliferation.⁴

Christine Fair points out that Pakistan has employed militant proxies from the very genesis of the state.⁵ This has included sponsoring both Islamist and Shikh terrorists internal to India (including the disputed Kashmir and cities within India) and ethnoterrorists in Northeast India.⁶ Dr. Fair compellingly argues that the use of these terrorist networks, accompanied by vehement and public denial of said use to the United States, is ingrained in the Pakistani State and notably the Pakistani Army (to the degree to which these are not one and the same). As discussed above, this convergence of interests emerged during the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, when the U.S. and Pakistan, with financial support from the Gulf States, supported mujahadeen fighters in Afghanistan. However, Pakistan insisted on routing all military and humanitarian aid through explicitly Sunni Islamist organizations,⁷ specifically the warlord Hekmatyar. This continued when they supported the Taliban over the U.S.-leaning Northern Alliance. This support for Islamic militants was expressly contrary to the interests of the U.S. even before September 11, 2001.

After the 9-11 attacks, Pakistan's support of Islamist militant groups in Afghanistan became more extraordinary. Previously, while this support contravened stated U.S. interests, it was not directed against the United States or its forces. This soon changed. Almost from the very beginning of the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, as manifest in the infamous Kunduz

⁴ However, these two areas are the only incidences of Pakistan's faithlessness. Despite being a signatory to SAETO, Pakistan did not support the U.S. in the Vietnam war. See Leszek Buszynski, "SEATO: Why It Survived until 1977 and Why It Was Abolished," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 12, no. 2 (September 1981): 287-96, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022463400009887>.

⁵ C. Christine Fair and Sumit Ganguly, "An Unworthy Ally: Time for Washington to Cut Pakistan Loose," *Foreign Affairs* 94, no. 5 (2015): 160-70.

⁶ C. Christine Fair and Sumit Ganguly, "An Unworthy Ally: Time for Washington to Cut Pakistan Loose."

⁷ C. Christine Fair, *Fighting to the End: The Pakistan Army's Way of War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 126.

Airlift,⁸ Pakistan's continued support for the Taliban, and particularly the Haqqani Network, after 2001 resulted in repeated attacks on and deaths of hundreds of U.S. servicemembers fighting on behalf of GIROA in Afghanistan.⁹ In addition, some of the supported Islamist groups (somewhat predictably) turned on the Pakistan State itself, particularly in the *Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan* (TTP). Pakistan then engaged in rent-seeking activity and sought and obtained U.S. financial underwriting for its crackdowns and military engagements along the Afghanistan border against the very terrorist groups it deliberately cultivated. Dr. Fair wrote, "Islamabad created a permanent revenue stream by arguing that as long as it is fighting militants, it should be entitled to U.S. Aid."¹⁰ Moreover, while this support for avowed enemies of the United States was ongoing, Pakistan also, on at least two occasions, transferred advanced U.S. military hardware being employed to combat terrorists to the PRC for exploitation.¹¹

The second area in which Pakistan demonstrated its duplicity with the United States was its acquisition of and attempted proliferation of nuclear material. Pakistan, unlike its neighbor in India, lacked the economic and technological prowess to develop the bomb independently. Instead, it received critical know-how, supplies, and parts from the PRC in the 1970s and 1980s. All the while, Pakistan denied its ongoing efforts to the United States, even in the face of (U.S. intelligence procured) incontrovertible evidence of their covert nuclear weapons program.¹² Ultimately, Pakistan declared itself a nuclear state in direct opposition to U.S. desires and interests. More concerningly, it attempted to proliferate the technology to rogue states such as

⁸ C. Christine Fair, "Pakistan's Deadly Grip on Afghanistan," *Current History* 116, no. 789 (2017): 136–41. Pakistan airlifted hundreds or even thousands of Taliban, Al Qaeda militants, and ISI and PAKMIL personnel.

⁹ Fair, *Fighting to the End*.

¹⁰ Fair and Ganguly, "An Unworthy Ally."

¹¹ Small, *The China-Pakistan Axis: Asia's New Geopolitics*. This included a tomahawk cruise missile and an advanced stealth helicopter used in the Abbottabad raid.

¹² *Ibid*, at 32.

Libya, Iran, and North Korea under A.Q. Khan. Pakistan only reigned him in when faced with intense pressure from the United States in 2004, and even then, quickly pardoned him.¹³

The U.S.-Pakistan relationship can be characterized as Pakistan receiving “quid” from the United States and, while repeatedly saying “quo,” failing to follow through on its promises. It frequently worked directly against U.S. interests while demanding and accepting military and financial aid. This has been true over decades with both elected and military governments. As Dr. Fair argues, it seems to be ingrained in the “deep state” of Pakistan’s security and government establishment. She notes that, nevertheless, the U.S. for decades has foolishly “continued to believe that some magical combination of military and financial assistance will bring Pakistan onboard.”¹⁴ To continue this self-delusion further would be folly.

Why The U.S. Is Not Going to Care More About Pakistan Than China.

The second reason the U.S. should not try and compete with China for influence in Pakistan is that the CPEC and overall Chinese investment in Pakistan is orders of magnitude greater than the U.S. support to Pakistan. The Chinese have promised in the range of 40-60 billion dollars of Chinese investment in CPEC,¹⁵ whereas the U.S. Aid to Pakistan from 2001-2017 was in the range of 33 billion. After that time, the Trump Administration significantly curtailed aid (and it has not revived anywhere near the Chinese level under the Biden administration). As the Atlantic Council noted, “(t)he United States cannot match China’s economic investment in Pakistan or the region for that matter...”¹⁶ China sees the CPEC as a

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Fair, “Pakistan’s Deadly Grip on Afghanistan.” At 137.

¹⁵ Daniel Markey, “How the United States Should Deal With China in Pakistan,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, accessed September 14, 2022, <https://carnegietsinghua.org/2020/04/08/how-united-states-should-deal-with-china-in-pakistan-pub-81456>.

¹⁶ Katherine Walla, “Biden Needs a New Pakistan Policy. This Is What It Should Look Like.,” *Atlantic Council* (blog), February 10, 2021, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/biden-needs-a-new-pakistan-policy-this-is-what-it-should-look-like/>.

means to buy influence, counter India, and, perhaps most critically, mitigate the vulnerability of its SLOCs, particularly traffic through the straits of Malacca. While Pakistan always has and continues to covet high-end U.S. weapon systems (and sustainment for those systems), they are far more dependent on the benefits CPEC is perceived to provide, and China is now Pakistan's largest bilateral creditor. Pakistan and PAKMIL's view on this can be seen in the statement of Pakistan's Chief of Army Staff in 2018, saying, "the BRI with CPEC as its flagship is destined to succeed despite all odds and Pak Army shall ensure the security of the CPEC at all costs"¹⁷ in response a Pakistani Minister's critical comments weeks prior. Given the host of interests facing the U.S. and fierce competition for resources and congressional/domestic pressures against support to Pakistan, U.S. military and diplomatic leaders would be unable to muster anywhere near the level of investment that China has undertaken, even if it desired to. Given Pakistan's predilection to accept U.S. aid and provide only the most limited support to U.S. policy references, while conversely, Chinese aid has bought total silence on the issue of the PRC placing hundreds of thousands of Muslims in concentration camps, it is unlikely that anything short of matching the PRC would bring the U.S. the influence it seeks.

Why The U.S. Should Move on from a Country with which It Lacks Vital National Interests or Shared Worldview.

The final and most compelling reason that the U.S. should not try and compete with China for influence in Pakistan is that it simply lacks the vital national interests to do so. Moreover, the moral and ideological nexus that not infrequently motivates U.S. foreign policy is similarly absent in Pakistan. With the demise of GIROA at the hands of the Pakistan-supported

¹⁷ Madiha Afzal, "At All Costs: How Pakistan and China Control the Narrative on the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor," Brookings Institution, June 2020, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/at-all-costs-how-pakistan-and-china-control-the-narrative-on-the-china-pakistan-economic-corridor>

Taliban, the United States no longer requires the ground lines of communications (GLOCS) through Pakistan, upon which it was critically dependent for nearly two decades. Pakistan achieved the weak and dependent government in Kabul it long sought in the name of strategic depth. Accordingly, the challenges of instability and economic weakness in Afghanistan are more of Pakistan's problem than that of the United States. Like the proverbial dog who long chased the mail truck, when it finally catches it, the dog finds its prize so big and unwieldy to manage. Pakistan now finds a failing state on its border which it helped create, and the rest of the globe unwilling to take up the burden of supporting it.

The other cornerstone of the U.S.-Pakistan relationship, its anti-communist and anti-Russian stances, have both been turned on its head as Pakistan has cozied up to the last major communist country on earth and has deepened military and economic ties with Russia.¹⁸ In terms of trade, Pakistan's biggest export destination is the U.S., but Pakistan only represents a tiny percentage of U.S. foreign trade; Pakistan is not in the top 50 U.S. trade partners.

In terms of shared cultural ties and shared worldview, other than the English common-law legal systems, relatively little binds the U.S. and Pakistan together. In addition to Pakistan's continued support for terrorists, which is anathema to the U.S., Pakistan still allows capital punishment for blasphemy. Hundreds of people (many Christians or other non-Muslim faiths) have been lynched or sentenced for blasphemy. Former Prime Minister Khan said he "wanted people in the West to be scared of blaspheming against our prophet."¹⁹ This incongruence is

¹⁸ Riaz Khokhar, "What Is Driving Pakistan's Outreach to Russia?" *The Diplomat*, 11 Mar 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/2022/03/what-is-driving-pakistans-outreach-to-russia/>

¹⁹ Kunwar Khuldune Shahid, "How Islamist Fundamentalists Get Away With Murder in Pakistan," *Foreign Policy* (blog), accessed October 26, 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/12/08/pakistan-blasphemy-killing-priyantha-kumara-islam/>.

hard to overlook, given how fundamental freedom of speech and religion are to the U.S., domestically and internationally.

So, what remains? The United States has continued counter-terrorism interests in external operation threats from Afghanistan and Pakistan. Pakistan is similarly threatened by some of these same terrorist actors, namely ISIS-K and the TTP, and there is some history of cooperation on these issues. Additionally, the U.S. maintains a desire for overflight of Pakistan to conduct recon and, if needed, conduct CT strikes inside of Afghanistan like the strike that killed Al Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri in July of 2022. The U.S. also continues foreign military sales (FMS) to Pakistan, though the number of systems and sales have fallen in recent years. The U.S. is also intensely interested in securing Pakistan's nuclear weapons and ensuring they are not proliferated to rogue actors. However, Pakistan has a more substantial interest in ensuring this; attribution would not be difficult if one of their weapons were to be used somewhere in the world. Moreover, in the face of losing control of a weapon, it would confront strong international backlash globally, particularly against the military, further undermining and weakening the state and its role within the state. Finally, no one's interests are served by the collapse of the Pakistan state.

None of the above remaining interests warrant the enormous U.S. military and economic investment that previously underpinned the relationship. The strongest are likely the collapse of the Pakistan state or loss of control of nuclear weapons. While it remains in Pakistan's interest to overstate these risks as a negotiating tactic with the U.S., Dr. Christine Fair notes Pakistan has demonstrated remarkable resiliency in its short but turbulent history, surviving the loss of

multiple wars and the loss of over half its population with seemingly little threat of total collapse.²⁰

The other key facet of this discussion of interests is that heavy Chinese investment (and thereby stake in) Pakistan may paradoxically serve overall U.S. goals in the region. This is because, after much initial enthusiasm and fanfare, the CPEC has become mired in bureaucratic, financial, and security problems. China has found some of the bureaucratic hurdles to Pakistan's own internal infrastructure projects are similarly plaguing its own efforts. Daniel Markey notes "...delays on CPEC projects and concerns about the financial viability of future projects raised or reinforces doubts among Chinese policymakers," causing the PRC to shift from "touting the CPEC as a flagship for the BRI to describing it as a pilot project."²¹ He also notes "there are many reasons to anticipate that CPEC's second phase could run into even more challenging headwinds than the first."²²

Compounding the problems is the fact that "Pakistan lacks the political will to break the grip of powerful vested interest groups... these elite groups receive about 17.4 billion in economic privileges."²³ Finally, many of the projects run through the restive Baluchistan province and have seen numerous attacks and deaths of Chinese nationals in the region, similar to the type that threatened U.S. GLOCS during the war in Afghanistan. Also, seeing as China seeks to recoup its investment (most of the investment is in the form of loans vs aid), it has huge

²⁰ Christine Fair, *Fighting to the End: The Pakistan Army's Way of War*.

²¹ Markey, "How the United States Should Deal With China in Pakistan," 5

²² Ibid.

²³ Younas Uzair, "Pakistan's Growing Problem with Its China Economic Corridor," United States Institute of Peace, accessed October 26, 2022, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2021/05/pakistans-growing-problem-its-china-economic-corridor>.

financial incentives²⁴ to ensure Pakistan remains economically solvent and able to pay its debts.²⁵ Thus, in pulling back from Pakistan, the U.S. could effectively force its 'pacing challenge' in the PRC to double down on a bad investment, throwing good money after bad, to protect its sunk monetary and reputational costs.

COUNTERARGUMENT AND REBUTTAL

The strongest counterargument to my thesis is that a failure to invest and compete with China will cede Pakistan wholly to their influence, and severely limit U.S. leverage to accomplish its CT objectives in Pakistan and Afghanistan. Moreover, it could be that U.S. financial support could amount to difference between weak and failed Pakistan, and the costs of the latter could potentially far exceed those of continued significant military and economic investment in Pakistan.

The rebuttal to this argument is that the U.S. must expend its finite international aid, investment, military sales, and diplomatic capital selectively, in accordance with its own national interests. Supporting Pakistan is no longer in its vital interests, and it would be better to spend and (try) to win elsewhere than to spend and lose in Pakistan, given the scale of current Chinese investment. Finally, as noted above, it may actually be in the U.S. interest to saddle China wholly with the responsibility and means to prop in the Pakistan regime and the CPEC. Continued mutually beneficial bilateral trade, counter-terrorism intelligence cooperation, and MIL-to-MIL exchanges and provision of subject matter expertise, particularly on nuclear security, can and should continue. However, it would be unrealistic and unnecessary to expect this to enable the U.S. to compete directly with China for influence on Pakistani policy. The

²⁴ Though most CPEC loans are made by semi-private companies within the PRC rather than directly from the PRC.

²⁵ Younas Uzair, "Pakistan's Growing Problem with Its China Economic Corridor." "...a socially and economically unstable Pakistan will not only be unable to repay its Chinese debt, it will also become an increasingly disruptive force in the region, creating national security risks for both China and the United States."

U.S. political establishment should accept this as a consequence of focusing its efforts on more important and fruitful areas of the world.

CONCLUSION

The U.S. should curtail direct aid, investment, and military sales of high-end equipment until such time as Pakistan implements systematic governance and human rights reforms, abandons state-sponsored terrorism as a tool of the state, and reduces its military budget to one commensurate with its means. Even with these reforms, the U.S. should limit its aid and engagement to be commensurate with continued U.S. vital national interests in Pakistan rather than try and compete with China, which does perceive vital national interests in the country. Following the disastrous withdrawal from Afghanistan, U.S. interests can be boiled down to nuclear security within Pakistan, continued overflight for drone surveillance and intelligence gathering on EXOPS-capable terrorists, and avoiding the total collapse of the Pakistan state.

Accordingly, selective counter-terrorism intelligence sharing can and should continue, as should bilateral military engagements and efforts to promote nuclear security. Additionally, efforts to increase trade (vs. aid, investment, or FMS) should continue, as should periodic HADR. Concurrently, the U.S. should forge closer ties with India, including increased FMS, with the ultimate goal of creating a multilateral defensive alliance system of democratic nations in the region to complement existing bilateral agreements. Possible countries include South Korea, Japan, India, Australia, New Zealand, the U.S., and possibly the Philippines to counter the rising PRC military threat to peace and stability in the Pacific.²⁶

²⁶ Though Taiwan is also obviously democratic, as arguably are other small nations in the region, alliances should be made with countries that bring strength and not undue risk to the alliance. Taiwan's vulnerability, and the criticality that the PRC places it bringing it back under communist control a critical national objective make it an unfavorable alliance partner in the region.

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Implications of Nuclear Weapons on Strategic Competition

Thesis. Nuclear weapons change the nature of strategic competition in two key ways. First, by making direct conflict between two nuclear-armed powers much less likely, and second by making low-level activities “below the threshold of conflict” more likely. Of these two factors, the first is the more significant; it represents a fundamental change in the nature of strategic competition compared to the millennia preceding it. The consequence of this thesis is that conflicts within strategic competitions are more likely to play out in economic and diplomatic realms or in peripheral theaters using proxy states or forces than before the nuclear age. Thus, Grand Strategy is elevated in importance in the atomic age.

Reduction in Likelihood of Major State-on-State Conflict. Nuclear weapons make wars between atomic powers with unlimited or near-unlimited aims unwinnable, as nuclear weapons impose unacceptable costs even to the putative victor. Even wars with limited aims and limited objectives between two nuclear-armed states still carry the significant risk of undesired nuclear escalation. Because of these two factors, conflict between nuclear-armed strategic competitors is less likely than between two non-nuclear strategic competitors. The first argument that supports this thesis is empirical. Great Power competitions before the age of nuclear weapons nearly always resulted in multiple direct conflicts between the competitors, often at significant cost to both powers. The Peloponnesian War(s), The Punic wars, the Franco-British wars from 1716-1815, and the British-German competitions from late the 19th century to the end of WW2 all resulted in state-on-states conflict between the principles, at vast costs of blood and treasure to both sides.

Moreover, the Hapsburgs, Ottomans, Russians, Swedes, and Prussians all fought each other on multiple occasions in the ~400 years before Hiroshima. The so-called “Thucydides

trap” drew many, if not most, strategic competitors into direct conflict with one another as the underlying power dynamics between the various powers shifted. Yet since the Americans dropped two atomic bombs on Japan, no nuclear weapons have been used in anger, and no nuclear-armed strategic competitors have gone to war with each other. While the PRC and the Soviet Union fought an undeclared but significant border skirmish in 1969, and India and Pakistan have engaged in multiple minor skirmishes at contested border points, none has declared war on or committed substantial portions of their armed forces against the other.

The second argument supporting the thesis addresses the “why” raised by the above empirical examples of great-power competition pre and post-splitting of the atom. *Why* have nuclear-armed states not engaged in direct conflict with each other up to this point, and *why* are they unlikely to do so in the future? The answer is mutually assured destruction (MAD) and the risk of nuclear escalation. Nuclear weapons make Clausewitz’s theoretical “Absolute war” possible,¹ giving a state the power to annihilate an adversary. As Admiral Radford put it, “a war of annihilation might possibly bring a pyrrhic military victory, but it would be politically and economically senseless.”² Clausewitz’s basic theory of the purpose of war, to pursue a political objective, is rendered impossible because no objective that includes the “victor’s” functional survival is obtainable. Moreover, the conquered territory would be radioactive ash, reducing the value of the object to near zero. Finally, the potential global environmental implications of even a one-sided nuclear exchange could be calamitous for victorious, defeated, and neutral countries alike. Following Clausewitz’s precepts to “establish the kind of war upon which you are

¹ Clausewitz, Carl von. *On War*. Michael Howard and Peter Paret, eds. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976, at 78.

² Weigley, Russell. *The American Way of War: A History of United States Military Strategy and Policy*. New York: Macmillan, 1973, at 378.

embarking”³ and to conduct an assessment has and will lead rational actors to vehemently avoid any war in which that actor assesses thermonuclear weapons employed upon their nation as a likely outcome.

The above reality undergirds Type 1 nuclear deterrence,⁴ or basic deterrence. The concept means that using nuclear weapons on any state with a robust second-strike capability will likely bring about functional MAD. Even in ‘victory,’ the defeated nation could impose similar destruction upon the victor; minimal second-strike capability could result in tens of millions of deaths, trillions of dollars in economic harm, and irreparable environmental damage. This dynamic would shift if a nation believed it could execute a successful first strike and preclude a retaliatory strike. Thomas Schelling noted that the risk of conflict could increase if one party thought they could gain a significant enough advantage in “shooting first” to successfully execute a successful first strike and/or counterforce attack on the other’s nuclear arsenal.⁵ However, throughout nearly all of the atomic age, and for the foreseeable future between great powers, the “missiles will always get through.” Nuclear states deliberately build redundant and resilient second-strike capabilities, particularly nuclear SLBMs and mobile launchers, to deter first strikes.⁶ “Shooting the arrows” at the scale and speed with which strategic competitors could launch them is not feasible and will not be for the foreseeable future. Accordingly, fear of retaliation means that nuclear states have overwhelming interests in avoiding a nuclear exchange. Therefore, they will maintain strong incentive not to enter into a conflict in which a nuclear exchange is possible.

³ Clausewitz, Carl von, at 190.

⁴ Kadercan, Burak. “Nuclear Proliferation and Arms Races” (U.S. Naval War College Lecture, Newport, RI, 3 Feb 2023).

⁵ Krepinevich, Andrew F. “The New Nuclear Age: How China’s Growing Nuclear Arsenal Threatens Deterrence.” *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 101, no. 3 (May-June 2022). Pages 92-98, 100

⁶ Wohlstetter, Albert. “The Delicate Balance of Terror.” *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 37, no. 2 (January 1959), at 231.

There is a counterargument to the empirical and logical arguments presented above. First, as to the empirical basis, one could offer that strategic competition has existed between states for at least 2500 years, while nuclear weapons have only existed for ~80 years. Moreover, only a handful of states possess weapons, most of whom are formally or informally allied with the United States. This, therefore, represents a relatively small sample size from which to draw sweeping conclusions. Moreover, U.S. and Soviet Union (1948, 1962, 1973), the Soviet Union and PRC (1960s-1970s), and India and Pakistan (1999) all *nearly* engaged in direct conflict at various points in the nuclear age. The Soviets even contemplated a first strike against the nascent Chinese nuclear program to the point of socializing it with the United States. According to this argument, contemporary states may have gotten lucky over the past 73 years. And simply because two nuclear states have not yet gone to war does not logically dictate it cannot or will not happen.

The rebuttal to this is that while it may be that the world is fortunate that miscalculation in the nuclear age hadn't led to nuclear war, the above examples did not result in all-out war *because* atomic weapons were potentially involved. Modern strategic competitors have rigorously avoided crossing perceived red lines and actively sought de-escalation in the face of all-out war. Both Soviet and American retraining pressure on the Arabs and Israelis, respectively, in the 1973 Yom Kippur War is an illustration of this playing out.

A second counterargument to the thesis that nuclear weapons make direct conflict between strategic competitors less likely is that while nuclear-armed states may not undertake unlimited wars or attempt first strikes against fellow nuclear-armed competitors, that does not necessarily preclude attempting *limited* wars against strategic competitors or against putative allies of the competitor, with the expectation that the conflict would be contained. The latter is

essentially the challenge of Type 2 or ‘extended’ deterrence. Part of this argument is the emergence of the “nuclear taboo,”⁷ whereby international norms are so set against nuclear weapons that any future first-user would be made a near-pariah state. A would-be aggressor might contemplate successfully employing conventional force against a nuclear-armed strategic rival in a war of limited aims that wouldn’t put the opponent on death ground. The nuclear taboo and the adversary’s fear of escalation might be expected to buy down the risk of unintentionally climbing the escalation ladder. Moreover, internal domestic pressures could increase the risk appetite for an insecure regime seeking to wag the proverbial dog and increase the temptation to engage in a limited war with a nuclear rival. An obvious example would be an attempted Chinese invasion of Taiwan, including attacking American forces postured to defend the island.

The challenge of extended deterrence is why the balance of conventional force strength still matters and explains why South China Sea military assessments focus on numbers and quality ships, planes, and conventional missiles rather than nuclear payloads or urban deaths from fallout. The failure of Eisenhower’s New Look and “Massive Retaliation” programs illustrates the inability of threatened nuclear retaliation alone to deter any/all types of aggression. While a nuclear-armed state could deter a strategic competitor from an all-out nuclear attack by holding its cities at risk, responding to minor incursions in distant theaters with a similar nuclear response was both morally bankrupt and nearly impossible to credibly threaten; the perceived value of the object was well short of the perceived risks involved. As NSC 68 predicted and advocated for a significant and flexible conventional deterrent was also needed. The implication of the above is that a state might be willing to risk war with a nuclear competitor on the belief

⁷ Kadercan, Burak. “Nuclear Proliferation and Arms Races” (U.S. Naval War College Lecture, Newport, RI, 3 Feb 2023).

that the conflict could be localized and fought for limited aims with limited means and that neither side would breach the nuclear taboo.

The rebuttal to this counterargument is that the risk of nuclear escalation still places a significant restraining hand on decision-makers as they balance risk and reward. It is undoubtedly true that nuclear weapons cannot preclude nuclear competitors from engaging in conflict. Additionally, the shadow cast by their respective conventional forces will still play enormous roles in crafting and deciding policy. Nevertheless, states will still temper any policies or decisions, knowing that open conflict with a nuclear-armed state could result in nuclear war.

This awareness is due to the well-recognized risk of unanticipated escalation in time and intensity of open conflicts between two strong competitors. Once clashes between major strategic competitors started, they historically proved difficult to contain. Often, they escalated well beyond what either combatant initially assessed or desired, particularly in both World Wars. Additionally, with this escalation, perceived regime survival, concern about sunk costs, and the ‘primordial passions’ of the people come into play, significantly increasing the stakes and risk appetite of one or both competitors while limiting off-ramps. Wargaming at the Naval War College between two nuclear powers usually results in a quick rise up the escalation ladder to employing nuclear weapons.⁸ States and leaders know this dynamic and the difficulty in controlling the escalation ladder well. States are also deliberately vague in articulating their red lines for using nuclear weapons to deter opponents from approaching them.⁹ Decision makers are accordingly strongly deterred from undertaking actions that they perceive could lead to direct conflict with a nuclear power, *even if they believe the ensuing conflict might be contained.*

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Biddle, Tami Davis. "Coercion Theory: A Basic Introduction for Practitioners." *Texas National Security Review* 3, no. 2 (Spring 2020), at 103.

Thus, in the discussions of decision for war, the presence of established nuclear weapons programs will always exercise a significant, if not dispositive, restraining influence on strategic competitors from deliberately engaging one another. As a result, nuclear weapons significantly raise the risk threshold for nuclear-armed states contemplating war with a competitor, even limited wars, and thus make such conflicts less likely to occur. This dynamic implies that economic strength and alliance structure are more important than sheer numbers of nuclear weapons over the long term. While major pre-nuclear strategic competitions were rarely settled by decisive military victory, the competitors nevertheless repeatedly employed time, effort, and resources to attempt it (e.g., Sparta, Napoleon, Moltke the Younger, etc.). In the nuclear era, conventional force is about posturing and deterring in peripheral theaters, not winning strategic conflicts outright.

Nuclear Weapons Increase the Likelihood of Low-Level Conflict Between Strategic Competitors:

The second way the nature of strategic competition has changed is the stability/instability paradox, whereby “stability at the central, strategic level allows for instability at lower levels of conflict.”¹⁰ Under this paradigm, fear of nuclear retaliation means that nuclear states are *more* likely to engage in low-level, proxy, or unattributable acts (e.g., cyber) within strategic competition under the perceived safety of the nuclear umbrella. This phenomenon was predicted by Liddell Hart in 1954 when he said, “to the extent that the [Hydrogen] bomb reduces the likelihood of full-scale war, it increases the possibility of limited war pursued by widespread

¹⁰ Hoyt, Timothy D. “Kargil: The Nuclear Dimension,” in *Asymmetric Warfare in South Asia: The Causes and Consequences of the Kargil Conflict*, Peter R. Lavoy, ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009. Pages 144-170, at 153.

local aggression.”¹¹ Hart was probably looking back to the Korean War and the nascent First Indochina War, where Soviet armed and supported forces fought against Western or Western-backed powers. Soviet and Chinese support for communists in the Second (American) Vietnam War and U.S. support for the Mujahideen in the Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan also support this argument. Both were undertaken with the (correct) assumption that the level of contemplated support would not precipitate conventional or nuclear response from adversaries unwilling to risk nuclear war over a peripheral theater with a relatively low value of the object.

The data supports this; following the advent of mutually assured destruction, the world observed a proliferation of low-level conflicts.¹² An example of this in the modern era is the Indian subcontinent. Pakistan frustrated Indian hopes and expectations that nuclear equilibrium would end low-level Pakistani-directed Islamist violence against Indians.¹³ In Kargil in 1999, Pakistan sent covert infantry forces over the Line of Control (LoC) just a year after it and India became declared nuclear states. It did so, risking direct conflict with a nuclear-armed strategic competitor, with the expectation that Indian fear of nuclear escalation would pressure the Indian side to accept a fiat accompli. Moreover, in an effort to try and play the international dimension to its advantage, Pakistan banked on the strong international preference against nuclear war to support this outcome and pressure India not to respond. Even once both these assumptions proved incorrect (the Indians responded forcefully to retake all captured territory, and the U.S. pressured Pakistan to withdraw), Pakistan continued to sponsor (but disavow) terrorist attacks within Kashmir and even Indian cities. Thus, Pakistan’s “nuclear weapons program encourages

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Kadercan, Burak. “Nuclear Proliferation and Arms Races” (U.S. Naval War College Lecture, Newport, RI, 3 Feb 2023).

¹³ Hoyt, “Kargil: The Nuclear Dimension,” at 145.

risk-seeking behavior, which has often led to crisis... (including) militarized disputes short of war.”¹⁴

Putin’s Russia also likely (correctly) predicted its actions against Georgia in 2008, Ukraine in 2014, Ukraine again in 2022, involvement in the U.S. 2016 election, and other cyber-attacks on the U.S./NATO allies would not elicit any direct Western military interference due in part to concerns of nuclear escalation. On the same token, U.S. and European aid to Ukraine is predicated on the assumption that Russia will not risk nuclear war by attacking the countries that are directly and overtly supplying lethal military assistance, threats to do so notwithstanding. The last case differs from the other examples in that NATO’s conventional overmatch also deters Russia.

A counterargument to the above is that low-level/proxy/ or peripheral theaters are familiar to strategic competition. They occurred within strategic competitions long before nuclear weapons or the security/insecurity paradox. Athenian and Spartan support for myriad smaller city-states, French support for American colonists, British support to Portuguese and Spanish guerrillas, French support to dissidents in Ireland, British subversion of the continental system, Imperial German proffers to Mexico, Western Support for White Russians, and Soviet and Fascist support to opposing sides of the Spanish Civil War all occurred before nuclear weapons. One can therefore argue that this facet of strategic competition is marked by continuity through the atomic age rather than change because of it.

However, while low-level conflict below the threshold of state-on-state war has long been part of strategic competition, the stability/instability paradox means that states which might

¹⁴ Fair, C. Christine. *Fighting to the End: The Pakistan Army’s Way of War*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014, at 225.

otherwise be deterred from this low-level action by the conventional response (e.g., Pakistan with India) are emboldened by their nuclear umbrella. Dr. Fair's analysis of the increase in low-level Pakistan attacks following their atomic tests is persuasive.¹⁵ Moreover, the Cold War consisted of nothing but low-level and proxy conflicts between the two superpowers enabled by the security of a nuclear umbrella. All were executed by individuals deliberately calculating the risk of nuclear escalation within their adversary's decision-making process, pushing as far as they believed they could get away with before crossing red lines.

The Truman administration, for example, refused to bomb north of the Yalu River in the Korean War out of fear of escalating the conflict with a nuclear-armed Soviet Union. The Johnson administration micromanaged tactical targeting decisions in North Vietnam, sortie by sortie, to avoid unwanted escalation with the Soviets or Chinese. Similarly, the Nixon administration's decision to initiate Linebacker I and II was primarily predicated on their (correct) assessment that the Sino-Soviet split meant they could bomb in and around Hanoi without triggering a conventional or nuclear response from either the PRC or Soviet Union. A decade later, the U.S. felt confident enough to spend hundreds of millions (eventually billions) of dollars providing Mujahedeen weapons expressly designed to kill Soviet soldiers. Like in previous conflicts, a line was carefully toed, but the U.S. nevertheless directly contributed to the deaths of tens of thousands of Soviet soldiers, confidently operating under the perceived threshold of retaliation its nuclear arsenal provided. These nuclear age examples of proxy conflict, therefore, represent a fundamental shift in the dynamics of strategic competition.

Conclusion. In conclusion, nuclear weapons change the nature of strategic competition by decreasing the likelihood of nuclear state-on-state conflict while increasing the opportunities and

¹⁵ Fair, at 250-251.

incentives for activities below the perceived threshold of conflict. The implication of the latter point for the U.S., the Joint Force, and our allies is that identifying ways and means to deter “below the threshold” challenges without resorting to conventional or nuclear force is critical. Additionally, with the likelihood of direct conflict with a strategic competitor significantly reduced, financial strength and economic vitality become even more important determinants of long-term success. A victory over said competitor by feat of arms alone via a “quick decisive victory” becomes almost impossible. A successful Grand Strategy that maximizes these factors, solidifies alliance structures, and mobilizes all instruments of national power is indispensable for strategic competition in the nuclear age.