
Rational Choice Theory and India-Pakistan Conflicts

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This research article explores the enduring conflict between India and Pakistan through the lens of Rational Choice Theory (RCT), examining how strategic decision-making influences bilateral relations in a nuclearized environment. The study investigates historical and recent conflict episodes—such as the Kargil conflict, the 2001–2002 military standoff, and the Balakot incident—to understand the motivations behind each state's behavior. The paper argues that despite intense ideological and nationalistic rhetoric, both nations have acted as rational actors under the shadow of nuclear deterrence. By integrating theoretical insights from RCT and complementing them with historical and regional contexts, the article offers a nuanced understanding of crisis behavior, conflict escalation, and de-escalation in South Asia. It further considers the role of domestic politics, international diplomacy, and institutional mechanisms in shaping foreign policy choices, ultimately providing implications for future peacebuilding efforts.

Keywords: Rational Choice Theory; India–Pakistan Relations; Nuclear Deterrence; Crisis Decision-Making; Conflict Escalation; South Asian Security

Introduction

The conflict between India and Pakistan has been one of the most protracted and volatile rivalries in modern international relations. Since their partition in 1947, the two nations have engaged in multiple wars, numerous military skirmishes, and several diplomatic standoffs, primarily rooted in territorial disputes over the region of Jammu and Kashmir. Beyond the formal wars fought in 1947-48, 1965, 1971, and 1999 (the Kargil conflict), the rivalry continues to manifest through a series of high-stakes military and political standoffs. These include the 2001-2002 military mobilization following the attack on the Indian Parliament and the more recent 2019 Balakot airstrikes, which brought both countries dangerously close to the brink of war once again.¹ The nature of conflict between the two rivals is rooted in the colonial legacies of British Raj. The partition of the subcontinent in 1947 precipitated this rivalry, making both the Hindu and Muslim identities as the fundamental reasons behind the state conflict. One of the most significant aspects of the partition was cessation of Indian Administered Kashmir by India which provided enough fodder for both sides to remain in a permanent state of war. However, the driving force behind this animosity still remains the religious identities of both sides which not only provide permanent motivation to remain in a conflictual state but also gives a huge sense of pride in preserving their declared position at the time of war. The communal violence and bloodshed during the partition left deep scars on both nations, embedding a legacy of mistrust and hostility. Kashmir, with its Muslim-majority population and strategic significance, became a symbol of unresolved tensions. For Pakistan, Kashmir represents the unfinished business of partition and a matter of Islamic solidarity, while for India, retaining Kashmir is tied to its secular identity and territorial integrity. This clash of ideologies fuels not only political rhetoric but also the broader narrative of nationalism in both countries. The religious underpinnings of the conflict are further reinforced by domestic politics. Moreover, the ideological dimension of the conflict has extended beyond the state apparatus, influencing educational systems, media narratives, and public opinion in both countries. Given that both countries are nuclear-armed and possess sophisticated military capabilities, the stakes of their disputes are extraordinarily high, with global ramifications. This study seeks to analyze these conflicts through the lens of Rational Choice Theory (RCT). RTC is an analytical framework widely applied in the social sciences, particularly in international relations, to understand decision-making processes.

Explicating the Pretext of RCT

Rational Choice Theory posits that decision-makers—whether individuals, states, or organizations, act rationally to maximize their perceived benefits and minimize their costs, given a range of choices. The theory assumes that actors are capable of identifying their preferences, assigning values to different outcomes, and making strategic calculations about the best possible course of action based on available information. It is difficult to academically decipher and analyse the complex relationship between RTC and ideologically motivated conflicts. However, in the case of Pakistan and India, the prism of RTC has not only avoided the ongoing conflicts from going into full scale war but also left the practitioners of international politics surprised. When analyzed through the perspective of nuclear power rivalry, the application of RTC on both sides have been elaborate despite the fact that both sides went on the brink of full-scale war, at least, four times since 1998 when Pakistan also became a nuclear power followed by India. This, in return, brings us to the modern statecraft, where states have to measure their losses and benefits vis-a-vis their ideological choices and national identities. This brings us to the realm of modern statecraft, where states must measure their losses and benefits in light of their ideological choices and national identities.

For India and Pakistan, ideological commitments to territorial claims, religious identity, and historical grievances are significant, but they are not immune to pragmatic considerations. The paradox of this relationship lies in the coexistence of intense ideological rhetoric with cautious strategic behavior. While ideological narratives fuel domestic support and national pride, the specter of mutual destruction compels both nations to navigate their rivalry with a degree of rationality, making RCT an invaluable framework for understanding their complex dynamics. Pakistan and India are nuclear capable states. The history of conflicts between two states not only makes them important in the international system but also keeps the international community concerned about a potential nuclear threshold. Despite the constant conflicts and wars between the two states, both sides have given a calibrated response by keeping the conflict at a low trajectory. It denotes that both sides consider themselves as responsible states in an international system where both have to adhere to the global norms. This realization makes them 'rational actors' of the system and the application of rational choice theory can keep both sides at relative peace by avoiding

nuclear threshold.² The intricacies of the international system and global politics get into play when states go into a conflict.

The international system, characterized by its anarchic nature, forces state to prioritize survival and security above all else. This often leads to conflicts as states seek to protect their interests and assert their influence. However, global politics introduces additional complexities, as conflicts between states rarely remain isolated. Regional and international actors, alliances, and organizations often intervene, either to mediate or to exploit the situation for their own strategic advantage. Globalization further intertwines conflicts with the broader international system. Economic interdependence, trade relations, and global supply chains mean that regional instability can have far-reaching implications.

For example, tensions between India and Pakistan not only affect South Asia but also raise concerns about global security, particularly given their nuclear capabilities. In this interconnected world, the resolution or escalation of conflicts is often influenced by the interplay between state ambitions, regional dynamics, and international pressures, highlighting the multifaceted nature of modern conflicts. Global powers have been pursuing a balance of power to maintain their sphere of influence. In the case of Pakistan and India, both the United States and Soviet Union kept supporting each side, as per their regional and global interest, during the Cold War. In the 21st century Pakistan-India conflict, China has replaced the Soviet Union in influencing the conflict between the two states. Regardless of this change, the core purpose of great power politics remains the same - to maintain the sphere of influence by siding with a party of their own choice at the time of conflict. The pursuit of an international system, primarily driven by great power politics, plays a pivotal role in making other states make rational choices while dealing with a bilateral or regional conflict. Therefore, states must consider their positionality in the international system as well its influence in their domestic environments which one way or the other create an impact on decision makers.

Application of RCT in South Asian Context

Thus, the choice of war and peace remains a point of concern at the time of a conflict where the decision makers calculate their international alignment and how far their allies will help them if they choose war. Resultantly, RCT has not only domestic factors to get into play but also it is the international

system which influences the choices of decision makers of a state. Problem Statement The enduring conflict between India and Pakistan represents one of the most significant geopolitical challenges in South Asia, with far-reaching implications for regional stability and international security. Despite numerous rounds of military confrontation, diplomatic negotiations, and intermittent peace processes, a lasting resolution to the Kashmir dispute and broader bilateral tensions remain elusive.

The question of why rational decision-making has often failed to prevent escalation or foster cooperation between these nuclear-armed states requires a deeper understanding of the underlying strategic calculations that guide their actions.³ The rivalry has become a new normal where both sides have avoided a nuclear conflict or full-scale war without resolving the outstanding issues. This research aims to address the gap in the literature concerning the application of Rational Choice Theory (RCT) to the analysis of decision-making in the context of India-Pakistan conflicts. Specifically, it seeks to identify how the rational calculations of leaders in both countries shape their responses to crises, influence their choices regarding military engagement and diplomatic outreach, and ultimately affect the trajectory of bilateral relations.

By analyzing key conflict events, such as the Kargil conflict, the 2001-2002 military standoff, and the Balakot incident, this study will explore the extent to which RCT can elucidate the decision-making processes of both nations.⁴ It is pertinent to mention that domestic politics of both the countries, especially in the last 25 years, have played a pivotal role in creating a hype and keep the bilateral relations at conflictual position. The central problem of this research is the persistent cycle of conflict and crisis between India and Pakistan, despite the potentially devastating consequences of military escalation in a nuclear context. The research will examine the strategic miscalculations, misperceptions, and irrational behaviors that may arise even within a framework of rational choice, thus complicating the decision-making landscape. Understanding these dynamics is significant for developing effective strategies for conflict resolution and enhancing regional stability in South Asia. By illuminating the rational underpinnings of bilateral disputes, this study aspires to contribute to the broader discourse on international conflict analysis and inform policymakers engaged in peacebuilding efforts between India and Pakistan:

The Historical Contextualization of Conflict

The historical context of India-Pakistan relations is essential to understanding the rational choices that leaders on both sides have made. The birth of both nations came with the violent partition of British India in 1947, which led to the division of the subcontinent into two sovereign states: a Hindu-majority India and a Muslim-majority Pakistan. The immediate aftermath of this division saw widespread violence, with nearly a million people killed and over 15 million displaced. One of the most critical consequences of partition was the dispute over the state of Jammu and Kashmir, which was acceded to India despite its Muslim-majority population and geographical contiguity with Pakistan.⁵

From the very beginning, Pakistan viewed Kashmir's accession to India as illegitimate, leading to the first Indo-Pakistani war in 1947-48. The war ended with a United Nations-mediated ceasefire and the establishment of a Line of Control (LoC) that still divides the region.⁶ However, the status of Kashmir remains unresolved, with Pakistan continuing to claim it in its entirety, while India maintains that Kashmir is an integral part of its sovereign territory. These claims on Kashmir are embedded in legal, political and social arguments where both sides have been developing their own sources of knowledge for their own people as well as the international community. At the same time, both Pakistan and India have adapted to their own national strategies to keep this conflict alive and each one of them can regain the entire state of Kashmir. Since the 1947-48 war, the Kashmir dispute has been a central issue in India-Pakistan relations, fueling nationalism, militarization, and diplomatic tensions. The two countries fought a war over Kashmir in 1965, followed by the 1971 war, which was primarily triggered by the Bangladesh Liberation War, leading to the dismemberment of Pakistan and the creation of Bangladesh.⁷ While the 1971 war did not center on Kashmir, it further deepened the antagonism between the two countries.

The 1999 Kargil conflict, led to a high-altitude military conflict that was eventually resolved through military engagement and international diplomatic pressure. Kargil conflict, unlike the previous wars between Pakistan and India, triggered under the nuclear umbrella when both sides had officially announced themselves to be the nuclear armed countries. This added a new layer of complexity to the conflict, as the stakes were

significantly higher. Both countries conducted nuclear tests in 1998, just a year prior, officially declaring themselves nuclear-armed nations.

This development fundamentally altered the strategic calculus, introducing the concept of "nuclear deterrence" into the equation. The Kargil conflict also highlighted the role of global powers in managing conflicts between nuclear-armed states, the media in both India and Pakistan will become highly nationalistic, thereby limiting options for policy makers and negotiators. Editors and owners need to be taken into confidence with requests that they retain the coverage thereby facilitating de-escalation.⁸ Since the late 1990s, both India and Pakistan have openly declared their nuclear capabilities, introducing a new dimension to their strategic calculations.

The existence of nuclear weapons has raised the stakes of any military confrontation between the two countries, making the potential costs of war much higher. Scholars and policymakers have often speculated that nuclear deterrence has acted as a stabilizing factor in South Asia, preventing full-scale wars despite numerous provocations. However, this has not stopped the two countries from engaging in low-intensity conflicts, cross-border skirmishes, and proxy wars, particularly in the Kashmir region.⁹

Rational Choice Theory and India-Pakistan Conflicts

The Theoretical Framework Rational Choice Theory provides a useful lens for analyzing the strategic interactions between India and Pakistan. At its core, RCT posits that actors are rational entities who seek to maximize their utility while minimizing costs. Applied to international relations, RCT suggests that states make decisions based on a rational assessment of their interests, goals, and the constraints imposed by their external environment.¹⁰

This often involves weighing the potential costs and benefits of actions such as war, diplomacy, deterrence, and negotiation. In the case of Pakistan and India, rationality is not an internal desire but an external factor where the international system shapes the choices of both sides. James March & Johan Olsen advocated for a "logic of appropriateness" rather than strict rational choice and emphasized that institutions socialize actors, shaping behavior beyond self-interest.¹¹ In the context of India-Pakistan relations, RCT can help explain why both nations have repeatedly chosen to engage in military

conflicts despite the high risks associated with war, particularly in a nuclearized environment.

For example, the decision to go to war in 1965, the choice to escalate tensions during the Kargil conflict, or the decision to carry out airstrikes in Balakot in 2019 can all be analyzed through the lens of rational decision-making.¹² By understanding the perceived benefits that both India and Pakistan hoped to gain, such as territorial control, prestige, or domestic political gains, scholars can better assess the logic behind these actions. Pakistani leadership has often faced internal contradictions in crisis management.

Kargil was a diplomatic disaster, while Balakot revealed intelligence failures on both sides. Media hype worsens tensions, reducing space for rational policymaking. The biggest challenge is breaking free from historical mistrust to engage in meaningful crisis resolution mechanisms.¹³ Rational Choice Theory also accounts for the role of uncertainty in decision-making. Leaders often have to make decisions based on incomplete information about their adversary's intentions, capabilities, and willingness to escalate a conflict. This uncertainty can lead to misperceptions, brinkmanship, and unintended escalation, as seen in several India-Pakistan confrontations.

However, RCT suggests that even in these situations, actors attempt to make the best possible choices given the information they have, often employing strategies of deterrence, signaling, and bargaining to achieve their objectives.¹⁴ As Pakistan and India share a history of animosity, military strategies and sources of information about the weaknesses and strengths of both the armies are exposed to each other. Thus, the chances of miscalculations have been shrinking. The Strategic Interaction Between India and Pakistan India and Pakistan's relationship is often characterized by what game theorists refer to as a “repeated game” of strategic interactions. In such scenarios, both sides engage in multiple rounds of conflict, negotiation, and deterrence, with each side's choices influenced by their prior interactions.

Rational Choice Theory suggests that in repeated games, actors are likely to develop strategies based on their expectations of the other side's behavior, often leading to patterns of reciprocity, escalation, or compromise.¹⁵ The longevity of a conflict can be a double edged sword; it can make states to be

more informed about each other before escalating a conflict but at the same time it can embolden a state to escalating a conflict on the pretext that adversaries response and impact of that response is well calculated and that a state can bear the calculated losses. The introduction of nuclear arsenal has complicated the simple strategies and calculations of both Pakistan and India. Since both countries possess nuclear weapons, any conflict between them carries the risk of escalation to nuclear war, with catastrophic consequences for both sides. This has led to the development of a delicate strategic balance, in which both sides attempt to deter each other from escalating conflicts while avoiding actions that could provoke a nuclear response.¹⁶

This is often referred to as the “stability-instability paradox,” where the presence of nuclear weapons provides a degree of strategic stability by deterring full-scale wars but also allows for lower-intensity conflicts and skirmishes to occur without the risk of total war. Amid this paradoxical situation, Rational Choice Theory can be used to analyze how India and Pakistan make decisions regarding nuclear deterrence and escalation control. Both countries have developed doctrines of nuclear use that emphasize deterrence while leaving room for ambiguity in certain situations, such as India’s “no first use” policy and Pakistan’s emphasis on tactical nuclear weapons.

These doctrines reflect rational calculations about how best to prevent escalation while maintaining the ability to defend national interests. The interplay of rational choice theory and nuclear deterrence have become symbiotic where war strategists of both sides carefully view the situation to avoid full scale war.

Case Studies for Analysis

This research will focus on several key case studies of India-Pakistan conflicts, analyzing them through the lens of Rational Choice Theory to understand the strategic calculations made by both sides. These case studies include:

The Kargil Conflict (1999)

The Kargil conflict occurred when Pakistan tried to infiltrate the Kargil district in Jammu and Kashmir, leading to a high-altitude war between the

two countries. Despite the risks of escalation, Pakistan's leadership under Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and General Pervez Musharraf believed that India would not respond forcefully due to concerns over nuclear escalation.¹⁷ This miscalculation, rooted in a rational cost-benefit analysis that underestimated India's willingness to use conventional force, ultimately led to escalation. It also gauged the velocity of escalation and how far both sides can escalate a conflict under the nuclear umbrella.

The 2001-2002 Military Standoff

Following the attack on the Indian Parliament in December 2001, India mobilized its military along the border with Pakistan, leading to a ten-month-long standoff. Both countries engaged in extensive military posturing, with India threatening punitive strikes against Pakistan for its alleged support of militant groups. However, neither side escalated the conflict to full-scale war, likely due to the rational calculations of the costs associated with nuclear escalation.¹⁸ In this case, the international environment, especially that of the 9/11 attacks, might have influenced both sides to de-escalate the conflict. Mumbai Attacks (2008) The Mumbai attacks of November 26-29, 2008, were a series of coordinated terrorist attacks carried out by Lashkar-e-Taiba. Over the course of three days, ten attackers targeted multiple locations in Mumbai, including luxury hotels, a railway station, a café, and a Jewish community center, resulting in the deaths of 166 people and injuring more than 300.¹⁹ The assaults, which were marked by indiscriminate killings and hostage situations, were broadcast live on television, shocking the world and leading to widespread condemnation. The attacks intensified tensions between India and Pakistan, with India accusing Pakistan of harboring and supporting terrorist groups. In the aftermath, India implemented stringent security measures and reassessed its counter-terrorism strategies, while the attacks also prompted significant international discourse on terrorism and security in South Asia.²⁰

The Balakot Incident (2019)

The Balakot airstrikes marked the first instance of airstrikes between India and Pakistan since 1971. In response to a suicide bombing in Kashmir that killed 40 Indian paramilitary personnel in Kashmir. India carried out airstrikes in Balakot claiming that it was a militant camp deep inside Pakistani territory. Pakistan responded by launching airstrikes of its own, leading to aerial dogfights and the downing of an Indian fighter jet. Both

sides ultimately de-escalated the situation, but the crisis highlighted the strategic calculations involved in carrying out military strikes while managing the risks of further escalation.²¹

Each of these case studies will be analyzed using Rational Choice Theory to explore the decision-making processes behind key strategic choices, such as war initiation, escalation, and crisis management. The analysis will focus on the factors that influence these decisions, including domestic political pressures, international diplomatic considerations, and the role of nuclear deterrence. The study will also analyze how the advent of non-state actors and growing role has reshaped the face of conflict in South Asia.

This will further delve into theoretical anomalies of RCT amid domestic realities which often lead to miscalculations. Expanding Rational Choice Theory Beyond Military Conflict While Rational Choice Theory is often applied to the analysis of military conflicts, it can also be extended to other aspects of India-Pakistan relations, such as diplomacy and peace negotiations. For example, both countries have engaged in numerous rounds of negotiations over the Kashmir issue, including the Simla Agreement (1972) and the Lahore Declaration (1999).

However, these negotiations have often been derailed by strategic mistrust and the inability to reach a mutually acceptable solution. Unlike diplomatic fronts, the application of rational choice theory in military conflict is more prominent where both sides have been avoiding a nuclear war. Rational Choice Theory can help explain why these peace negotiations have repeatedly failed. One possible explanation is that both India and Pakistan have different perceptions of the costs and benefits associated with compromise. For Pakistan, relinquishing its claim over Kashmir may be seen as a betrayal of its foundational identity as a protector of Muslim interests, while for India, any compromise on Kashmir is viewed as a threat to its territorial integrity.

These differing calculations have made it difficult for both sides to reach a negotiated settlement, as the perceived costs of compromise outweigh the potential benefits.²² At the same time, relinquishing the claims on Kashmir has become invariably a matter of national shame for both sides. The deeply entrenched ideological and nationalistic narratives in both countries amplify this issue. Moreover, domestic political dynamics in both countries often hinder peace efforts. Leaders face immense pressure from hardline factions,

media, and public opinion, making it politically costly to appear weak or willing to compromise. The lack of trust between the two nations exacerbates the problem. Both sides fear that any concession might be exploited as a strategic weakness.

This zero-sum mindset perpetuates a cycle of hostility, making rational, mutually beneficial agreements difficult to achieve. Until these fundamental perceptions and domestic pressures are addressed, peace negotiations are likely to remain stalemated. India and Pakistan's crisis management is deeply tied to their nationalistic politics. From Kargil to Balakot, both nations have leveraged military conflicts for domestic gains. International actors play an essential role, but regional de-escalation frameworks are largely absent. Diplomatic outreach, when attempted, is often undermined by nationalist rhetoric.

Theorizing the Conflicts

By examining key case studies such as the Kargil conflict, the 2001-2002 military standoff, and the Balakot incident, the study aims to uncover the rational calculations behind critical strategic decisions made by both countries. The research will contribute to the broader literature on international conflict analysis by demonstrating how Rational Choice Theory can be applied to understand the dynamics of an enduring rivalry between two nuclear-armed states. It will also examine how the civil and military leaderships of both sides have approached the cost-benefit aspects of a conflict. By exploring the decision-making processes that have shaped India-Pakistan relations, this study hopes to offer insights into how future conflicts might be prevented or managed.

Literature Review

The India-Pakistan relationship has been a subject of intense academic scrutiny due to its complexity and historical significance in international relations.²³ The application of Rational Choice Theory (RCT) to this relationship provides a nuanced understanding of the strategic calculations made by both countries. This systematic literature review synthesizes existing scholarship on RCT, India-Pakistan conflicts, and their intersection, highlighting key themes, debates, and gaps in the literature. Simultaneously, it will provide a gateway to future scholarship with historical stipulations

and how both countries have avoided a major conflict despite the presence of permanent animosity.

Rational Choice Theory emerged as a prominent theoretical framework in the social sciences, particularly in economics and political science. Its foundational premise is that actors are rational, aiming to maximize their utility based on available information.²⁴ RCT has been applied to various domains, including foreign policy analysis, to explain state behavior in an anarchic international system. This paradigm is not limited to managing conflict but has played a pivotal role in creating social equilibrium in a society. The broader contours of RTC are social and primarily pertain to social behaviors of the individuals. In political context, the application of RTC still remains limited to diplomatic and military strategies where the practitioners of foreign policy and war strategy alike give a deep thought to RTC. Scholars have argued that RCT offers a robust analytical framework for understanding international conflicts, emphasizing strategic decision-making under uncertainty.²⁵

RCT posits that states assess the costs and benefits of potential actions or no action, making decisions that align with their national interests.²⁶ This framework has been instrumental in analyzing conflicts, alliances, and the use of force in international relations.²⁷ The national interest activates RTC and vice versa. Policy makers keep the driving force of their national interest as a foremost priority and apply RTC to calculate how their state can benefit from a particular choice. The relationship between India and Pakistan has been fraught with tension since their partition in 1947. Historical grievances, territorial disputes, and the legacies of colonialism have shaped their interactions.²⁸ The Kashmir conflict remains central to their rivalry, with both nations asserting claims over the region. Scholars like Ganguli²⁹ and Hussain³⁰ have analyzed the impact of this dispute on bilateral relations, arguing that it serves as a primary source of conflict and a catalyst for military confrontations.

Similarly, these scholars have been in an academic quest to decode how both Pakistan and India have viewed their positions at the time of a bilateral conflict. The nuclearization of South Asia in the late 1990s marked a significant turning point in the dynamics of India-Pakistan relations. It shifted the entire war strategy from a traditional approach towards a modern approach where military strategies had to be scrambled to adopt the new aspects of modern warfare. Scholars such as Kumar³¹ and Chari³² have

examined how the possession of nuclear weapons altered strategic calculations, introducing a deterrent effect while simultaneously raising the stakes of military engagements.

The Kargil conflict in 1999 and the 2001-2002 border standoff serve as case studies highlighting the interplay between military strategy and nuclear deterrence.³³ Several scholars have applied RCT to analyze India-Pakistan relations, emphasizing how strategic calculations shape decision-making processes. RCT provides insights into the motivations driving state behavior, particularly during crises and conflicts. For instance, Rath argues that both India and Pakistan utilize RCT in their military strategies, weighing the costs of aggression against the benefits of territorial gains.³⁴ The interplay of RTC in military strategy precipitated after the introduction of nuclear weapons in their military capabilities.

This not only changed the approach of both sides towards conflict but pushed the practitioners of military strategies to adapt to global experiences of conflict and conflict resolution. The role of domestic politics in shaping foreign policy decisions has also been a key focus of RCT applications.³⁵ Strategic cultures of both Pakistan and India have verily shaped the public opinion thereby making peculiar domestic environments. Scholars like Malik³⁶ have highlighted how leaders in both countries employ nationalist narratives to legitimize their actions, often prioritizing domestic stability over international cooperation.

RCT suggests that these leaders are motivated by the need to maintain power, leading to strategic calculations that may prioritize short-term gains over long-term peace. Apart from the traditional sources of public opinion, the advent of mass media has further complicated the process of domestic politics. The competing narratives of different influential groups in both the states have played a significant, yet complex, role in clearly defining what their national interest is. The economic dimensions of India-Pakistan relations further illustrate the utility of RCT. Both the nations have large populations to cater. While economic cooperation has the potential to foster stability, historical grievances often impede progress.

Research by Bhattacharya³⁷ and Saba Gul Khattak³⁸ highlights the rational calculations involved in trade negotiations and economic partnerships, suggesting that both countries must recognize the mutual benefits of economic interdependence to advance their relationship. In the case of India

and Pakistan, the economic factor has not played a considerable role when it comes to bilateral trade. Despite this gap in de-escalating a conflict, both sides have managed the conflict at a low scale. Every crisis reflects the deep-seated animosity between both states.

The absence of structured diplomatic engagement results in militarized responses. While international intervention often tempers escalation, internal political narratives complicate matters. Without a permanent crisis-resolution framework, future conflicts will continue following this cycle of action, reaction, and belated de-escalation.³⁹ The application of RCT is particularly evident in case studies of military conflicts and diplomatic engagements between India and Pakistan. The Kargil conflict (1999) exemplifies how strategic calculations influenced decision-making on both sides. These strategic calculations were further managed by external factors where the diplomatic channels of the United States warned both sides from expanding the conflict into total war. Scholars like Perkovich argue that RCT elucidates the motivations behind Pakistan's incursion into Kargil, as well as India's subsequent military response.⁴⁰

This case illustrates the balance of power considerations and the role of deterrence in shaping state behavior. The 2001-2002 border standoff, following the attack on the Indian Parliament, serves as another critical case for RCT analysis. Scholars such as Dutta⁴¹ emphasize how both nations assessed the risks of escalation and the implications of their military postures. At this point of time, the international environment further drove both sides to avoid escalation. In post 9/11 global environment, the aspect of international diplomacy would have been missing with overly charged domestic environments in both states leaving their leadership to either resolve it at the expense of national perceptions or continue with the endless escalation leading to nuclear conflict. RCT helps explain how leaders made calculated decisions in a high-stakes environment, weighing the potential for military confrontation against diplomatic resolutions.

The 2008 Mumbai attacks further exemplify the utility of RCT in understanding India-Pakistan relations. Scholars like Ali⁴² and Cheema⁴³ examine how the attacks influenced the strategic calculations of both countries, affecting public sentiment and political discourse. It examines how a state acts when the stakes of its leadership are high to maintain the power at home by avoiding the domestic pressure. The subsequent Indian response and Pakistan's handling of the crisis are analyzed through the lens

of RCT, highlighting the pressures faced by leaders in both nations. Choosing between war and peace is not an institutional choice but a national responsibility where each side has to adhere to public sentiments while actualizing the military preparedness in relative terms.

Rational Choice Theory and India-Pakistan Conflicts

The review of literature on Rational Choice Theory and India-Pakistan relations highlights the relevance of RCT in understanding the strategic calculations that shape decision-making processes. While RCT provides valuable insights into the motivations that are driving state behavior, it also reveals the complexities of domestic politics, historical grievances, and economic interdependence. Despite the contributions of existing scholarship, gaps remain in the literature. Future research could explore the implications of emerging regional dynamics, such as China's influence in South Asia and the evolving role of the United States. Additionally, the intersection of RCT with other theoretical frameworks, such as Constructivism and Liberalism, could offer a more comprehensive understanding of India-Pakistan relations.

The application of Rational Choice Theory to the analysis of India-Pakistan relations reveals the complex interplay of strategic calculations, historical legacies, and domestic considerations. This study will delve into striking a balance between the domestic, regional and international factors that come into play while cushioning between war and peace. Although the domestic factors have played a more significant role than the regional and international factors, international scholarship has extensive research work encompassing all three factors to make a wholesome understanding of the conflict in South Asia. By synthesizing existing literature, this review highlights the importance of RCT in informing future research and policy discussions aimed at fostering stability and cooperation in a historically contentious relationship. **Contribution to Knowledge** While existing literature on India-Pakistan relations is extensive, the perspectives from India, Pakistan and the international scholarship have produced complex sources of knowledge to understand and recommend future courses of action. Apart from historical, polemic or rhetorical underpinnings of knowledge on India and Pakistan and the conflict between two states, a theoretical framework is partially, if not thoroughly, missing from the local and international scholarship.

Rational Choice Theory (RCT) provides valuable insights into the strategic dynamics between these two states, several significant gaps remain. On one side it provides a theoretical framework to understand the elite choices at the time of conflict whereas on the other side it becomes a source of objectivity to empirically indicate the consequences of a full scale war. RCT becomes a source of objectivity to empirically indicate the consequences of a full-scale war, offering predictions about the outcomes of military escalation, the role of deterrence, and the long-term consequences of conflict. RCT's emphasis on individual decision-making and state-level analysis often encompasses the broader regional and global context. The influence of international actors, such as the United States, China, or the United Nations, and their strategic interests, are lately incorporated into RCT's analysis of India-Pakistan relations.

As such, while RCT offers important insights into the behavior of both states, it needs to be supplemented with other theories and frameworks to fully understand the complexities of this longstanding conflict. Integration of RCT with Historical Context Much of the scholarship on RCT has focused on theoretical applications in isolated contexts, often neglecting the rich historical backdrop of India-Pakistan relations. This research fills that gap by contextualizing RCT within the historical events, conflicts, and socio-political dynamics that have shaped bilateral interactions. Although key conflicts such as the Kargil conflict, the 2001-2002 border standoff, and the 2008 Mumbai attacks have been analyzed, there is a lack of comprehensive studies that examine these incidents through a unified RCT framework. It fills the cliche of different choices where RTC has created a common source of knowledge for both sides to make their choices. This, in return, has brought both sides much closer in drawing similar conclusions of a possible conflict. The universality of the theoretical framework pertaining to RTC makes it easier for both sides to clearly foresee the consequences of nuclear conflict.

Conclusion

This research systematically evaluates these events, highlighting how RCT can explain decision-making processes and strategic calculations during each crisis. Previous research has often applied RCT in isolation from other theories or methodologies. By incorporating insights from Constructivism and Liberalism alongside RCT, this study provides a more nuanced understanding of India-Pakistan relations. The juxtaposition of different

theoretical underpinnings will enable us to make this research more interdisciplinary and pave the way for future scholarship to avoid strike rules of theoretical application for the sake of knowledge creation. At the same time, it enables us to deal with a complex phenomenon of war by incorporating multiple paradigms to make a wholesome understanding of state and its relationship with other states. It recognizes the importance of identity, ideology, and domestic politics, which have traditionally been underexplored in RCT-focused analyses.

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