Introduction

The ‘nuclear revolution’ in South Asia is not a single event or even a series of events occurring within a short time frame, such as the French Revolution or the Russian Revolution, but rather a longer term process that is comparable with the industrial revolution.1 Along the way, there have been several turning points, each bringing on the next. It began when India conducted its first nuclear test in 1974, which spurred Pakistan’s (already existing) quest for a deterrent. The covert nuclearization of the subcontinent in the 1980s launched the beginnings of a new high-tension phase of crisis-proneness in India–Pakistan relations that grew still sharper following the matching tests conducted by the rivals in the summer of 1998. But the overall consequences of the process have been more complex than it would appear at first blush. This chapter examines the dynamics of the India–Pakistan nuclear relationship within the framework of the theme of the volume, which is to assess broad developments in South Asia in terms of regional structures and processes. Is there a regional transformation in the making?2 Clearly, the presence of nuclear weapons is central to this question, for these are weapons that have a profound impact on the fates not only of those who possess them, but also of others near and far.

This chapter shows how the advent of nuclear weapons in the region has produced profound effects at three levels: the domestic politics of both countries, the bilateral relationship between them, and the relationship between the region and the global system. In domestic politics, nuclear weapons have contributed to significant changes in the civil–military balance; in bilateral relations, they have produced a Cold War-type rollercoaster relationship that has swung wildly between
the threat of nuclear war and the promise of enduring peace and, finally, at the global level, they have integrated South Asia more closely with the global system through the ongoing changes in major power relationships as well as in the nuclear non-proliferation regime. The overall picture is one of a bilateral strategic relationship – and therefore a regional system – that is in the process of positive change, one which an optimist might venture to view as a shift from a conflict-ridden system to a relatively cooperative one, but by no means one that is linear or even guaranteed.

Nuclearization and its effects on domestic politics

Within India and Pakistan, the effects of nuclear weapons are most prominently visible in the realm of civil–military relations, though in different ways. In India, they have undermined the power of civilian authority and strengthened that of the armed forces. In Pakistan, they initially had the same effect, but over time have contributed to the weakening of military power.

India

In India, civilian control over the military arm of the state is undisputed. It is the civilian authority that ultimately decides on issues of war, peace and treaty making, and on key aspects of the functioning of the military, such as hiring and firing, promotions and the allocation of funds. Yet in practice, the military has tended to determine vital decisions of strategy and arms acquisition because of the nature of the distribution of power between them. This is nowhere more evident than with respect to nuclear weapons-related policies. Following the nuclearization of the India–Pakistan relationship, the Indian state soon found itself in a strategic quagmire. Pakistan was able to use the acquisition of nuclear deterrence to put India under pressure. In the winter of 1998–1999, Pakistani troops disguised as ‘freedom fighters’ occupied fairly large tracts of land on the Indian side of the Line of Control (LoC), the agreed line dividing the disputed territory of Kashmir between the two countries. The Kargil crisis, as this event is known – though some call it a ‘war’ – came as a shock to New Delhi. More disturbing still was the extensive covert support given by Pakistan to groups fighting against the Indian state in Jammu and Kashmir, the portion of Kashmir on the Indian side of the LoC. After giving initial backing to local Indian groups seeking secession, Pakistan shifted its support to Al-Qaeda-linked