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Nuclear Stability in Asia and South Asia: the Dynamics of a Fragile Stability

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India-Pakistan-China relations determine South Asia's strategic stability. Recent events and disputes have heightened regional tensions, and have drawn the world's attention on the region's potential for conflict. The fact that all three nuclear weapon states have long-standing border disputes has been used by the non-proliferation lobbies to consistently highlight South Asia as a nuclear flash point. The intractable Kashmir dispute continues to be cited as the potential trigger for any nuclear escalation. These concerns were brought to the fore as the world witnessed the two nuclear armed adversaries fight it out on the Himalayan heights of Kargil in May 1999. While India fought the war firmly, and displayed significant escalation control and management of international opinion, it must be acknowledged that both countries kept the conflict below the nuclear threshold, thus questioning the nuclear flash point theory.

Strategic community and non-proliferation experts continue to highlight the conflictual nature of India and Pakistan with Kashmir being the core territorial dispute - the most critical factor that make deterrence stability suspect. These arguments continue to be conspicuous by their studied rejection of the impact and influence of China's nuclear capability on deterrence stability in South Asia. In analyzing the 'prospects for nuclear stability between India and Pakistan', in the aftermath of May 1998 tests, Francois Heisbourg argues that bringing China into India-Pakistan nuclear dynamics is irrelevant (Heisbourg, 1998-99). While scholars acknowledge the fact that India's decision to go nuclear was largely influenced by China's nuclear test in 1964, many continue to hyphenate South Asian nuclear stability largely through the India-Pakistan prism.

China's contribution to Pakistan's nuclear capability is significant, and this makes China a critical player in the overall nuclear deterrence stability in South Asia. Effectively, Pakistan and North Korea are critical elements of

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China's extended proliferation strategy. There is obviously, a strong strategic collaboration between China and Pakistan, China and North Korea, and between North Korea and Pakistan. These proliferation relationships create a complex triangular issue of deterrence in South Asia involving India, Pakistan, and China. Many technological developments in recent years have contributed to the rise of serious concerns about conflict escalation and deterrence stability. Pakistan's focus on developing tactical nuclear weapons and its doctrine of "full spectrum deterrence" do not augur well for overall stability. The issue becomes delicate when Pakistan's fragile internal security raises the possibility of its nuclear weapons falling into the hands of jihadist elements. While this is contested strongly by Pakistan, it cannot deny the fact that part of the government, army, and intelligence agencies are closely aligned with jihadist elements, and pursue their acts of terror and subversion as state policy.

The South Asian Nuclear Conundrum: Terrorism, War, and Peace

The danger of nuclear conflagration in South Asia is seen as a distinctly high possibility, primarily due to the rivalry and the conflictual relationship between India and Pakistan. Most scholars, particularly from the West, tend to see the intractable conflict as a possible trigger for nuclear weapon use in a conflict. Most western analysts see nuclearisation in South Asia from a narrow non-proliferation approach; but it is not difficult to perceive that existential reasons, in one form or another, were the drivers for the two countries to go nuclear.

The causes of the India-Pakistan conflict are rooted in India's Partition history. While the modern Indian nation-state inherited the British Raj, crucially it also became the inheritor of the ancient Indian civilization mantle. Pakistan, on the other hand, became the seceding state, based on a motley group of varied territories, communities, and sub-cultures seemingly united by the Islamic religion. While India adopted democracy and secular norms, Pakistan continued to search for the elusive identity of a nation-state based on religion. Pakistan was an idea, or more accurately, an experiment (Ziring, 2003). In 1949, the 'Objectives Resolution' was so drafted as to frame Pakistan as a Muslim state (Ziring, 2003). Islam was made the unifying focus for the citizens, thus instrumentalising Islam in order to strengthen national identity by building a religious ideological state (Fair, 2011). To sustain the logic that Muslims were a nation and under threat, India had to be seen as a threat to the very existence of Pakistan.

Fundamentally, Pakistan's existential insecurities are deep-rooted, and stem from a set of complex factors. But suffice it to say that it is almost

entirely India-centric. Ayesha Siddiqa-Agha observes that Pakistan's defence planning revolves only around India. Consistently projecting an image of India as a state with hegemonic ambitions, and out to subsume the Pakistani state into itself, this insecurity is further deepened by the fragmentation of Pakistani society and the state's inability to anchor a sense of nationalism in the country. This is made worse by Islamabad's realisation about the increasing inequality between the two countries (Siddiqa-Agha, 2001).

Most studies relate India-Pakistan security issues and the nuclear arms race from the perspective of international relations theories of 'security dilemma, stability-instability paradox,' etc. They are also viewed in different models: the action-reaction model; the domestic structure model; and the technology imperative model (Jalil, 2017). Pakistan's birth as a nation-state was driven by religious radicalism, and its view of 'Hindu India' as its eternal enemy. Hence, explaining the security issue without considering this deep rooted psyche of Pakistan would not explain the logic of Pakistan's security decisions. Most scholars conclude that Pakistan's actions are reactive to the threat from the superiority of India's conventional forces. This would be too simplistic and flawed; the true causes flow from its failure to consolidate its democratic political structure and national identity, which in turn contributes to its apprehensions and suspicions about India (Dixit, 2002).

Contrary to Pakistan's repeated assertions that India threatens Pakistan, it is Pakistan that has initiated almost all the wars with India: in 1947-48 over Kashmir; the 1965 war over Kashmir, and the 1999 Kargil war. The war of 1971, which led to Pakistan's military defeat and the breakaway of East Pakistan, was again one of Pakistan's own making. This defeat put paid to Pakistan's hopes of the military defeat of India, and led to reformulation of its strategy against India. Its nuclear capability was driven by the need to ensure the survival of Pakistan as a nation-state. Under the circumstances, the mujahidin strategy proved to be the most viable tool for Pakistan to pursue a LIC (Low Intensity Conflict) strategy in Kashmir. Militancy and irregular warfare remains Pakistan's enduring strategy against India, and this is unlikely to change as it views the cost-benefit analysis as being distinctly in its favour. Nuclearisation has only strengthened its belief in this strategy (Fair, 2011). Nuclear weapons are seen as a bulwark against any major escalation from India's side while at the same time they are seen as providing the necessary flexibility to indulge in all forms of sub-conventional or low-intensity conflict.

There have been periods of peace in between, only to be disrupted by the concerted efforts of the non-state actors and terrorist groups such as the

LeT and Jaish-e-Mohammed. In all these situations, Pakistan has never failed to raise the spectre of using nuclear weapons, tactical or otherwise, should India escalate the issue with major military action. This asymmetric escalation posture has been the "deterrence optimal" for Pakistan, where it has been able to deter India's conventional military power on many occasions. Going nuclear with such an India specific outlook has enabled Pakistan to more aggressively pursue longstanding, limited revisionist objectives against India (Narang, 2009/2010).

It then becomes clear that Pakistan uses the nuclear instability and escalation threat to its advantage for pursuing a proxy war against India by using regular and irregular forces and taking care to avoid any evidence that could risk attributability. These asymmetric operations under the nuclear environment and with the use of jihad/militant strategy, emboldens Pakistan to push the strategic limits without worrying about India's retaliation. While the assured retaliation (NFU-No First Use) doctrine of India creates a stabilising second strike orientation, Pakistan's asymmetric escalation posture creates the instability of the rapid first use of nuclear weapons against conventional attack. The Kargil aggression by Pakistan was clearly a manifestation of the confidence that derives from such an attitude. From 2015, Pakistan has increased the tempo and scale of cross border incidents, firings, and infiltration of 'jihadists' into India. However, unlike in the past, India has now responded even more strongly with heavier firing and attacks across the border.[1] Pakistan has accused India of more than 1300 cease-fire violations in 2017 (Krepon, 2018). Quite clearly, the two countries have not allowed these series of cross-border fires to escalate or impact nuclear deterrence adversely. Informally it is known that the two militaries keep the communication lines open to defuse any escalatory event.

India, China, Pakistan: the Deterrence Stability of the Nuclear Triangle

Nuclear deterrence dynamics in South Asia is complicated by the inter-linked nature of the two security dyads: India-Pakistan and India-China. There are territorial and boundary disputes that characterise the two dyads at the basic level. However, far more complex strategic factors influence the relationships amongst the three countries. The logic of nuclear weapons in the strategic calculations of each country, and the interrelated factors that drive them should be understood clearly in order to analyse the issue of nuclear stability in South Asia.

India's decision to go nuclear, first in 1974 through a peaceful nuclear explosion and then in 1998 through an overt demonstration as a nuclear weapon state, has been well analysed in different perspectives (though all of the arguments may not be agreeable) by Karsten Frey in a well-researched book (Frey, 2006). India's reasons are much more than just the Chinese threat. India has always aspired to be a global power and, therefore, its decision to go nuclear was driven by a combination of various factors: the need for international prestige and power, the unresolved border dispute and rivalry with China; the rising power and influence of China; and India's strong objection to the unequal nature of the nuclear non-proliferation regimes. In consideration of these factors, India has always kept its nuclear options open. China's defeat of India in the 1962 border war; its occupation of Aksai-Chin since the 1950s and the continued claim over Arunachal Pradesh; and its nuclear test of 1964 have all contributed to the long-held Indian security perception that China continues to pose the major security threat to India. In the last 15 years, Indian analysts and the Indian government have not shied away from articulating the rising Chinese threat in the context of its 'string of pearls' strategy against India; its increasing presence and development of permanent bases in the Indian Ocean region; and its growing coercive economic influence over India's neighbours. Western analysts and non-proliferation experts largely continue to look at South Asian nuclear stability as India-Pakistan rivalry, ignoring the major impact of China's proliferation strategy over the years (Delpech, 1998-99).

China's nuclear assistance to Pakistan since the early 1980s has been a major factor in India's strategic and operational concerns. China provided active nuclear and ballistic missile support to Pakistan. The other major recipient of China's nuclear and missile assistance was North Korea, which developed mutual assistance programs in missile and nuclear technologies with Pakistan. India's large scale military exercise 'Brasstacks' in the Rajasthan deserts in end 1986 culminated in full scale mobilisation for war in January 1987. The exercise, in all probability, was intended to cut through Pakistan to neutralise its attempts at crossing the nuclear threshold. Counter movements by Army Reserve North by Pakistan and the diffusion of the situation by the Indian political leadership prevented a war.[2]

China has pursued a strategy of deliberate nuclear proliferation to its two main proxies and allies, Pakistan and North Korea. Its extended proliferation to Pakistan and North Korea is clearly designed to deflect and constrain the rise of India as its rival in Asia, while deflecting the American influence in East Asia. China-Pakistan relationship is described as an all-weather relationship

by the two countries, despite lack of shared culture, history, or economic ties. The glue sticking them together would appear to be military ties and the intent to keep their common rival, India, off balance. The China-Pakistan relationship introduces instability in the complex strategic nuclear triangle of China-India-Pakistan, and makes it harder for India in its security strategy.

Doctrine, Posture, and Nuclear Stability: China and India

Nuclear stability in Asia and South Asia depends on how doctrinal interpretation and its practice governs nuclear weapons force structures and their modernisation. Kenneth Waltz mentions seven possible reasons, one or more of which could inspire nations to seek nuclear weapons capability. The foremost reason is that 'Great Powers always counter the weapons of other great powers', which is further accentuated by the reason where 'a country without nuclear allies will want nuclear weapons all the more'. This is complemented by his seventh reason in which 'by building nuclear weapons a country may hope to enhance its international standing' (Waltz, 1981). China's and India's reasons for going nuclear are driven by a combination of the above reasons. The above factors also play a role in the evolution of the country's nuclear doctrine, which further has a major impact on its strategy and force structure.

China's nuclear strategy and doctrine have been shaped by leaders like Mao Tse-Tung, Zhou-en-Lai, and Deng Xiaoping whose thoughts were influenced by many years of revolutionary war. Mao's famous quote "the atomic bomb is only a paper tiger" was reflective of China's view of the nuclear weapon as a political tool rather than a weapon of war. As a nuclear weapon state, China has laid more emphasis on its No-First-Use (NFU) doctrine, and its guarantee that it will not threaten nor use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear states. Besides, China has emphasised that its nuclear weapons are primarily against the USA, and that it is focused on maintaining a viable second strike capability with a 'minimum credible deterrent' force structure. China's initial behaviour in the late 1950s and 1960s was one of opposing the nuclear dominance of the developed world. As China entered the global community as a member of the P-5, and evolved as an economic and technological power, it has changed its position in tune with other members of the Security Council. However, it continued its close nuclear cooperation with Pakistan and North Korea as this strategy served its national interests. While China's official stand conforms largely to non-proliferation norms and goals, its practice is rooted in realpolitik governed by self-interest.

China continues to modernise its nuclear force so that the quality of its second strike capability is high and robust. China possesses close to 400 nuclear devices, with about 200 operationally deployed. It possesses, reportedly, 30-60 ICBMs that can strike all of continental USA, and about 10 that could target Hawaii and Alaska. Besides, there are 100 odd IRBMs that could target its allies. China's triad is fully operational, with its SLBMs placed on its nuclear submarines and aircraft based delivery systems as well. All this naturally implies that all of India is within the Chinese nuclear range. China has continued to modernise its nuclear forces with solid fuel rocketry, MIRVs, and possibly tactical nuclear weapons. It has achieved rapid progress in its space based ISR and strategic communications systems. These add significant robustness to its second strike capability, through effective early warning. Reportedly, China is also working on its own missile shields.

With India's clear articulation of a No-First-Use policy, there exists a significant level of nuclear deterrent stability between the two countries. In official pronouncements, China continues to take a position of not recognising India as a nuclear weapon state, in line with NPT provisions. This, however, seems to be changing. India's Agni-V test in January 2018 elicited strong reactions from China. Given the long-standing border dispute between India and China, its continued apprehension about Tibet, and India's accommodation of the Dalai Lama and Tibetan exiles, China has now begun to regard India as a threat. China's increasing military deployments and operations in the TAR; its new military reforms of instituting theatre commands; operational restructuring of its Second Artillery, the increased focus on joint warfare and airborne operations, and the operational orientation to prosecute limited wars on its periphery are issues that India and the world need to be concerned about. Increasing incidents of border intrusions and clashes, like in 'Doklam' in July 2017, indicate that the Chinese military may be prepared to escalate border issues at the time of their choosing. India's disagreements with China's ambitious economic and strategic programme of Belt-Road-Initiative (BRI) has rankled China significantly. The BRI has huge global implications for China, and without India's endorsement and participation, China may find it difficult to see it through, as gradually India's decision may influence the smaller countries of the region. India's reservations on CPEC (China-Pakistan Economic Corridor), projected by Pakistan and China as the flagship project of BRI, stems from serious issues of sovereignty as the highway passes through disputed territory in the Karakorum region.

India has accelerated its missile developments and operationalisation of its IRBMs that cover entire China. Through the operationalisation of its nuclear submarine (*Arihant*) and SLBMs, (K-4 & K-15), it is well on course towards operationalising its triad of nuclear deterrence against China. With its growing economy, strong convergences with the USA, Japan, and other western economies, India is likely to take stronger positions on issues of its border disputes and its increasing role in the Indo-Pacific, which is likely to be seen by China as a challenge to its global power ambitions. Accordingly, China continues its strategy of using Pakistan to keep India boxed in South Asia. Until now, by building up Pakistan's nuclear arsenal and missile systems, China has effectively thwarted India and blindsided its challenge as China's main Asian rival. Similarly, China has also, in a sense, checkmated America and its allies, South Korea and Japan, by providing, through its proxy, Pakistan, nuclear weapons technology to North Korea.

While India-China rivalries seem to be getting intense, the chances that any of these could escalate into a conflict are highly unlikely, least of all a nuclear conflict. Given the dominant nature of the NFU strategy on their nuclear doctrines, complimented by their emphasis on minimum credible force structure, a nuclear conflict between the two is almost not probable. Even a large conventional conflict is very unlikely, partly due to the rapidly increasing trade between the two. In a matter of just a decade, India-China trade has grown from less than US$ 5 billion to over US$ 80 billion in 2016-17, with the balance of trade in China's favour by a huge margin. The future holds even greater potential, where India and China as partners in BRICS, are likely to play a major role in the transformation of the international system in the 21st century.

Doctrine, Posture, and Nuclear Stability: India and Pakistan

Pakistan's approach to its nuclear deterrence is both ambiguous and complex. Ever since the 1998 nuclear tests, Pakistan has maintained an aggressive pace in its nuclear force development. Pakistan does not subscribe to No-First-Use doctrine. Citing India's superiority in conventional force structure as a major threat, Pakistan has stated that it will use its nuclear weapons in the event of an Indian attack. In January 2002, in the midst of a major crisis – "Op Parakram" – Lt. Gen. Khalid Ahmed Kidwai, Director General of the Strategic Plans Division, explained the possible nuclear redlines for Pakistan in terms of nuclear thresholds, a combination of some or all of which could potentially create a situation wherein Pakistan's very existence is threatened, and trigger a Pakistani nuclear response.

Pakistan has clearly stated that its nuclear capability is India specific, meant to deter India militarily, and hence, it has adopted first-use policy. This first use policy naturally raised international apprehensions about Pakistan's focus on nuclear war-fighting, which could undermine nuclear stability in South Asia. Pakistan's approach to nuclear weapons is more about nuclear warfare than deterrence. Given other complexities in Pakistan, such as political instability, the dominant influence of Islamic fundamentalists and the clergy's hold over the state and civil society, the situation certainly gives cause for serious concern about the security and safety of its nuclear weapons.

Pakistan has been very clever and consistent in saying that India's military threat, and it's so called overwhelming conventional military superiority, is the reason for Pakistan acquiring and further developing nuclear weapons. It has now articulated its 'full spectrum deterrence' as a counter to the Indian Army's 'Cold Start' doctrine. The excuse of the 'Indian threat' is deeply flawed as it is Pakistan that has consistently adopted an aggressive approach to India over the last 70 years. Christine Faire strongly argues that Pakistan's use of Islamist militancy as a tool of foreign policy dates back to the early beginning of its statehood. Very soon after Independence, "Islamic Pakistan" was defining itself through the prism of resistance to "Hindu India", and hence 'confrontation with India' became a long-standing policy.[3] The acquisition of nuclear weapons has both enabled and emboldened Islamabad to pursue strategies - such as support for insurgents and proxy warfare - with increasing confidence that doing so will be cost-free or that, in the event of Indian retaliation, the international community will readily mobilise to diffuse the conflict (Fair, 2011).

There is no doubt that nuclear weapons in South Asia have brought a forced strategic stability between India and Pakistan. Pakistan, however, demands strategic parity in terms of force size and capability limitation, which is impractical and irrational. Pakistan consistently cites various India-specific issues such as Indian Army's Cold Start doctrine, the modernisation of the Indian armed forces, the Indo-US Nuclear deal, the development of Indian BMD (Ballistic Missile Defence) as strategic destabilisers.

Citing India's 'Cold Start' doctrine, Pakistan has adopted a more destabilising 'Full Spectrum Deterrence Doctrine' which is fundamentally an open-ended nuclear war-fighting doctrine. Pakistan has accelerated the production of nuclear weapons and warheads significantly. It has made significant breakthroughs in Tactical Nuclear Weapons, cruise missiles, and submarine launched cruise missiles. It has tested Raad, an air launched nuclear weapon cruise missile with 350 km range. A sea-based deterrent is under

development. Nasr (Hatf IX) is a surface to surface 'Tactical Nuclear Weapon' with 60 km range. It was tested from a multi-tube launcher vehicle (MLV). The missile is road mobile, solid fuelled, and a fire and forget weapon. It is meant to deter a conventional attack by India, and is deployed in battlefield formations close to the border. This lower level delegation increases the nuclear risk alarmingly. Pakistan has also tested Babur 3, a submarine launched cruise missile with 450 km range.

A major area of concern for India and South Asian nuclear stability is Pakistan's rate of fissile material production. Currently, it has four plutonium production reactors while India operates just one. Pakistan has the capability to produce approximately 20 nuclear warheads annually, while India is estimated to produce 5 (Krepon, 2015). Various estimates indicate that while India may have about 90 to 110 warheads, Pakistan has already outstripped India and is estimated to possess around 130 weapons. In five years' time, Pakistan is likely to have over 250-300 weapons, making it the fourth largest nuclear weapons state. Going by Soviet Union's experience, numbers are not an assurance; but it may take the state down a ruinous path. India has the economic resilience and the strategic depth to maintain its nuclear posture, but Pakistan as a state with serious structural weaknesses could pose a major threat to peace and strategic stability.

Conclusion

The nuclear weapons environment seems to be entering a phase of concern for international security community. The USA has recently released its NPR (Nuclear Posture Review) 2018, where the emphasis is on the modernisation of its weapons and enhancing their capability. Russia has announced a similar approach. These will have an influence on China to modernise its nuclear forces, which in turn will have a cascading impact on India and Pakistan.

South Asia and East Asia have come into focus as areas of concern for possible nuclear conflict. Given the long history of conflict and animosity between India and Pakistan, and the intractable boundary dispute between India and China, South Asia is a complex problem involving three nuclear weapon states. Both India and China follow a No-First-Use doctrine. This creates a stable deterrence environment, even though there are long pending disagreements. A conflict escalation, given the two countries' stature and their growing economic profile, is unlikely as the diffusion of the Doklam crisis shows. Notwithstanding this, the potential for limited conflict between the two does exist. The India-Pakistan environment is more complex because

of two factors: the intractable nature of the India-Pakistan dispute; and the active Chinese support to Pakistan.

In the last three years, Pakistan has scaled up its nuclear posture by announcing a destabilising 'full spectrum deterrence'; by operationalising its tactical nuclear weapons; and by accelerating its weapons and fissile material production for stockpiling. In all this, the Chinese assistance is unmistakably strong. With China announcing CPEC as its flagship project, the strategic dimension of the China-Pakistan partnership is worrisome, particularly in the context of Pakistan's active and continued support to radical jihadist and terrorist groups, like LeT and Jaish-e-Mohammad.

Some in the international community tend to take a simplistic view of South Asian nuclear stability as essentially an India-Pakistan problem. In attempting to address the issue of strategic stability, there are proposals, with strong backing from China, that recommend main streaming Pakistan by giving it concessions towards making it a normal nuclear weapon state. This would make the situation worse as Pakistan would not be made accountable for its role in supporting Islamic radicalism, jihadists, and terrorist activities. Pakistan is also part of China's extended deterrence strategy, and this makes China equally responsible and accountable as an indirect supporter of such practices. Real peace and strategic stability can be achieved only when states are made accountable for their direct and indirect support to conflict prone strategies, religious fundamentalism, and terrorism.

Notes :

[1] Over the last two years, India has responded aggressively to Pakistan's cross-border adventures, with the objective of increasing the cost to Pakistan. On January 15, the Indian Army foiled an infiltration bid in the Uri sector, and killed 6 Jaish-e-Mohammad militants and 7 Pakistani soldiers. In a paradigm shift as compared to past responses, India has effectively called the nuclear bluff by carrying out surgical strikes, raids, and has generally escalated the situation along the LOC. See, Gaurav C. Savant, "India is Finally Showing Signs of Wanting to Hit Pakistan where it hurts the Most", Daily O, 16 January 2018, at www. Dailyo.in

[2] This is the author's deduction. The author was part of the exercise, and was deployed at a forward fighter base. Neil Joeck's interpretation of linking the events in January 1987 as an alarmist reaction to the Pakistan Army reserve positioning, in the author's opinion, is seriously flawed. See, Neil Joeck, "Maintaining Nuclear Stability in South Asia", Adelphi papers 312, New York: Oxford University Press, 1997, pp. 21-33.

[3] Husain Haqqani, who was Pakistan's Ambassador to the USA, has cogently argued that reliance on militancy is not "just the inadvertent outcome of decisions by some

governments (beginning with that of General Mohammed Zia-ul-Huq) as is widely believed. While Pakistan instrumentalized Islam in order to strengthen national identity by building an ideological state and by pursuing Islamization, the state gradually made a commitment to Jihadi ideology." See, Hussain Haqqani, *Pakistan: Between Mosque and Military*, Washington DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2005, pp 2-3.

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