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INDIA-PAKISTAN NUCLEAR DETERRENCE STABILITY IN SOUTH ASIA

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Introduction

Nuclear deterrence is an important topic of discussion in the field of security studies in the last over more than seven decades ever since the United States and erstwhile Soviet Union became a nuclear power. However, in the context of South Asia, the question of nuclear deterrence arises since the two South Asian rivals became a nuclear power capability in May 1998. The deterrence stability in South Asia has been under stress over the past few years owing to an exponential increase in India's military build-up and defence procurement.1

Nuclear deterrence stability in South Asia becomes very much relevant when the relationship between India and Pakistan over the last more than five decades has been and continues to remain characterized by severe crises at irregular intervals.2 Both countries had already possessed sufficient nuclear weapons to ensure a robust, largely stable mutual nuclear deterrence. India and Pakistan are seeking new technologies and capabilities that dangerously undermine each other's defence under the nuclear threshold. Whatever they learn from past crises, the uncharted territory they are now exploring requires enlightened judgement about their doctrines, their nuclear and conventional capabilities, and their unpredictable implications in future crises.

Nuclear deterrence between India and Pakistan is becoming less stable with the passage of time and the increase in nuclear weapon capabilities. India and Pakistan have not addressed basic issues in dispute, nor have they agreed to set them aside. With no positive

sign in terms of resolving the Kashmir dispute in the distant future and the Islamabad's aggressive attitude, the possibility of future conventional war cannot be ruled out.

Deterrence stability can be secured most readily when states have no reason to fight or if they do, when nuclear and conventional capabilities are balanced and national trajectories are commensurate. Nuclear capabilities are roughly equal on the subcontinent, but disparities in national power are great and growing. The advent of new military technologies and resource advantages will further extend India's lead over Pakistan in conventional capabilities, while providing India the capacity to outpace Pakistan in nuclear capabilities 3

The present paper will make a critical analysis of the nuclear deterrence stability in South Asia. Despite differences in the scale and circumstances of these nuclear competitions, both pairings have in common an interactive strategic competition compounded by conventional force imbalances and contentious issues that could lead to conflict. The paper argues that deterrence stability between two nuclear-armed adversaries such as India and Pakistan or it can be China and Pakistan is a mirage. Instead, deterrence stability has proven feasible only when nuclear-armed states have little or nothing to fight about, when they address their security concerns through diplomatic means, when they agree to set them aside, or when one of the rivals collapses.

Conceptualising Nuclear Deterrence

Nuclear deterrence as a concept or an intellectual construct emerged in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Deterrence is the power to prevent, discourage, or dissuade a potential adversary from taking a particular course of action. Deterrence is actually a product of capability and credibility.

Deterrence = Capability x Credibility

Nuclear deterrence will continue to rely heavily on the credibility of a state's retaliation. While credibility will depend on both capability and intention; but capability refers to nuclear weapons hardware and their command and control systems. Intention is a complex psychological phenomenon.4

The key purpose of deterrence is to deter a nuclear and a conventional attack on the territory of a state, of allies, client states and friendly neutrals. Credibility is the addictive of effective deterrence. The problem arises when there is search for absolute means to provide fool proof deterrence. States choose to develop nuclear weapons for a plenty of reasons. Supporters of the nuclear weapons cited deterrence as the main role for going nuclear weapons. During the Cold War, nuclear weapons played an important role to prevent the

superpowers from engaging in a full scale war. Many theorists argue that this application of nuclear capability is still relevant and, citing the Cold War as an example, maintain that it still works and will continue to work. Indeed Kenneth Waltz claims that the more states that have nuclear weapons the less likely they are to be used: "Nuclear weapons restore the clarity and simplicity lost as bipolar situations are replaced by multipolar ones."5

The concept of nuclear deterrence is expanded to include threats to use nuclear weapons to deter other sorts of military action. Nuclear Deterrence is a military doctrine according to which the possibility that a country will use the nuclear weapons it possesses in retaliation will deter an enemy from attacking. It is a strategy of nations possessing significant nuclear arsenals for deterring military actions, particularly the initiation of nuclear war, on the part of other nations. Basically, nuclear deterrence is a strategy of promising to retaliate against another nation for some military action with the use of nuclear weapons. 6 Therefore, nuclear deterrence follows the rationale of the 'first user' principle. States reserve the right to use nuclear weapons in self-defence against an armed attack threatening their vital security interests. Possession of nuclear weapons could be seen as the ultimate bargaining tool in international diplomacy, instantly giving any nuclear state a seat at the top table.

The doctrine of nuclear deterrence is based on the underlying philosophy that Nuclear weapons are so destructive that no country would use them, because such use would cause massive humanitarian crisis and no political leader would be willing to risk the possible death of millions of their citizens. The threat of being overpowered or having mutually-assured destruction is enough to prevent the world's superpowers from escalating a conflict to the point that a military confrontation becomes necessary. Deterrence enthusiasts claim that nuclear weapons do not just protect countries against use of nuclear weapons by others, but even prevent war and promote stability. Kenneth Waltz has argued the logic behind nuclear deterrence in a way that,

"Although we are defenseless, if you attack we will punish you to an extent that more than cancels your gains."7

Thus, nuclear deterrence helps avoid a nuclear war as each side tries to secure their interests by avoiding a nuclear confrontation. Deterrence requires all parties involved to maintain the right balance between threat and reassurance.

India's Growing Conventional Superiority and Pakistan's Nuclear Capability

India continues to develop offensive conventional military options to respond to future terrorist attacks emanating from Pakistan, but these options do not mesh well with India's restrained nuclear doctrine and arsenal.

The rationale behind Pakistan's nuclear weapon programme is clear India centric. Islamabad sought to overcome the conventional military superiority of India which they consider to be a threat to their security. Pakistan's nuclear development came to the light in January 1972, when Prime Minister Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto announced a plan to develop nuclear arms at a meeting with Pakistan's top scientists at Multan.8 Besides, Pakistan's defeat in the hand of India in 1971 War and India's proven conventional military superiority over Pakistan were the main reasons for Pakistan's decision to go nuclear. Pakistan's nuclearisation has been aimed at managing the Indian threat by matching India's nuclear capability. How much Pakistan is committed for Nuclear weapons capability can be reflected from the statement made by former Prime Minister Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto's when he said that Pakistan will "eat grass" if necessary to stay at par with Indian nuclear capability demonstrate the depth of insecurity in the nation.

Agha Shahi, the former Pakistani Foreign Minister had underlined about the Pakistan nuclear programme that,

"The rationale of the programme is linked to the sovereignty, independence and security of Pakistan. It is grounded on the security imperatives of Pakistan to equalise, to compensate our military imbalance that hangs like the sword of Damocles over the head of the nation, which cut our country into two in 1971."9

By 1983, Pakistan had formulated plans to develop a nuclear weapon programme, and it was reported that in May 1983, China had tested a Pakistani nuclear device.10 Since then, it has aggressively pursued a covert nuclear programme which reached fruition in the 1990s. The maintenance of conventional balance and Pakistan's decision in 1998 to follow India in going overtly nuclear depicts Pakistan's sense of insecurity vis-à-vis India.

Pakistan's adoption of tactical nuclear weapons lowers the threshold for nuclear use, further complicating India's conventional and nuclear options to deter and, if conflict cannot be avoided, defeat its neighbor.11

India's decision to go for a nuclear weapons programme has nothing to do with the threat from Pakistan. Regional and global developments were the crucial factors that India influenced India to move in the decision of nuclear weapons programme, leading to the conduct of what is being termed as a "peaceful" nuclear test in 1974. The defeat in the hand of China in 1962 and China's first nuclear-weapon test in 1964, and the perceived intrusion of the United States and the Soviet Union on India's autonomy during the 1971 war with Pakistan.

Pakistan's nuclear-weapon program, meanwhile, was initiated following the ignominious loss of the eastern half of the country in the 1971 war with India. The sense of existential threat and insecurity since the partition of India and Pakistan in 1947, compounded by the subsequent bifurcation of Pakistan that produced Bangladesh in 1971, clearly helped motivate Pakistan to develop the bomb. For Pakistani politicians and military officers, nuclear weapons became a way to deter future conventional war with India that might threaten further territorial losses or even the survival of the state. Pakistan opted to pursue its nuclear-weapon efforts quietly, drawing on clandestine procurement of foreign technologies and equipment, and it was aided on several occasions by China.12

The 1998 nuclear tests not only brought the nuclear situation in South Asia more into the open but also forced India and Pakistan to grapple with the need to formulate and enunciate policies on nuclear deterrence that would reassure the international community that both states would be responsible stewards of nuclear weapons and materials.13

For nuclear deterrence and large scale clash avoidance, a protected second strike capability offers its services. An enemy can be easily dissuaded from his devious designs if its opponent is equipped with nuclear arsenal that can be preserved even after a nuclear attack, and then the possibility that that arsenal will be used to strike back in opposition to hostility. Deterrence stability is thus improved because states are discouraged to use their nuclear weapons first in a conflict, because of the fear that their attack will only provoke a nuclear second strike.

If a country faces a nuclear attack, it is obvious that the storage or bases, where the enemy presumes its nuclear arsenal is stockpiled, are targeted; so as to protect themselves against a retaliatory nuclear strike. But, if a country has sufficient nuclear weapons, and their survivability is assured through the way they are deployed, so they may be used as retribution, then that country has a Second Strike capability.

And, for that purpose the weapons that assure a Second Strike Capability are usually missiles that are either fired from movable land-based launch pads or from nuclear powered submarines. The continuously moving land based launchers are difficult to pin down and target and similarly the submarines which remain underwater for considerable lengths of time are even more challenging to detect and damage.

A Second Strike rebuttal would obviously aim for densely populated metropolises or other developed structures i.e. counter-value targets, on its adversaries land. Thus if even only a very limited amount of nuclear arsenal remains, even then can a Second strike become a source of collateral damage and demolition. The indication of being hit with that limited, remaining amount of nuclear arsenal that managed to survive, dissuades the enemy from even considering hostility.

In order for Pakistan's nuclear posture to be a success and act as an able deterrent, Pakistan needs to sustain the deterrence of its First Strike Nuclear Capability. The sustainability part would only arise from not only a credible but an assured Second Strike Nuclear Capability. The First strike serves to deter India from using its conventional military superiority from harming Pakistan and the Second strike adds to the value of the First strike. An assured Second Strike would reinforce Pakistan's need of deterring India from using conventional military might against Pakistan to harm its national interest or national security.

India-China Nuclear Posture and the Nuclear Deterrence

South Asian Nuclear deterrence is classically analyzed with reference to nuclear posture or force structure, as can be seen from the tangible capabilities such as warhead numbers, missile ranges, and the number of delivery systems possessed by these countries.14 There is a clear power asymmetry between India and China. By making use of its power capabilities, China's military has in recent year's demonstrated greater assertiveness in the South China Sea and along the Indian border. Concerns about the credibility of India's deterrent vis-à-vis China is particularly delicate. In fact, India cited China as a factor for conducting its nuclear tests in 1998, Beijing's comprehensive national power — relative not just to India but the world — has grown. India has a very real sense of worry created by the sharp and perceptible gap between India's and China's military capabilities. From the nuclear point of view, for many years the Sino-Indian situation was seen as stable because China maintained an NFU policy and a minimalist nuclear posture.15

Despite a prolonged border dispute, both the nuclear armed rivals, China and India have so far pursued similar nuclear postures. Both countries have issued no first use

declarations and have focused on economic metrics of national influence, and both have acted in ways that seem to reflect appreciation for the limited utility of nuclear weapons to achieve national goals. These parallel nuclear postures are all the more remarkable because Beijing and New Delhi fought a limited war over a long-standing border dispute that flares periodically as a result of encroachment by border patrols. Unlike the India-Pakistan border dispute over Kashmir, however, India and China do not exchange fire when encroachments occur.

Indian security suffered a serious setback after the India-China border war in 1962 and in particular after China tested atomic and hydrogen bombs in 1964 and 1967. In response and in a bid to ensure the security of our country, New Delhi tested a nuclear device in 1974 and acquired nuclear weapon capabilities in the late 1980s, and then in 1998, when New Delhi tested these devices — Indian and Chinese leaders have chosen not to emulate the nuclear superpowers.16

The key determinant of deterrence stability between China and India remains whether they can successfully manage or resolve their border dispute while growing bilateral trade and investment. If Asia's rising powers remain on this path, perturbations related to the measured growth of their nuclear capabilities can be managed. Since 1962, Beijing and New Delhi have demonstrated that the avoidance of a border war is mutually preferable, and possible, while in the last decade bilateral trade has grown appreciably. In the future, China and India might become another very hard case of deterrence instability, but this seems avoidable. For now, India and Pakistan provide the most prominent demonstration of the chimerical pursuit of deterrence stability between nuclear-armed rivals.17

India-Pakistan Nuclear Deterrence Stability

Nuclear deterrence stability between Pakistan and India is challenging because of asymmetries of power, close proximity, a record of misreading each other's intentions, and a history of war and crises. Rivalry between India and Pakistan has been endemic, resulting in wars, proxy wars, border clashes, and crises. Pakistan has devoted significant national, technological, and scientific resources to achieve security equilibrium with India and to deter India from taking aggressive actions. This strategic competition has had destabilizing effects on Pakistan, straining its resources and heightening internal security dilemmas. The conventional military imbalance with India is growing, leaving two options to reinforce an offensive defense posture. One — reliance on sub-conventional warfare — has proven to do

more harm than good for Pakistan. The other — strengthening nuclear deterrence — will remain a big challenge for Pakistan.

Owing to its small size and weak economy, Islamabad finds itself unable to match India's conventional military arms build-up. Pakistan developed its nuclear weapons capability as a balancer to counter the Indian threat. Pakistan has a first strike capability, however, a first strike capability has its strategic disadvantages due to which it must be backed up with a second strike capability. Nuclear second strike capability is the ability of a nation to absorb a nuclear strike and still attack its adversary with sufficient power. This capability deters the adversary from striking in the first place. The key ingredient of any second strike capability is the ability of a nation to shield its second strike 'platform' from a nuclear strike.18

Nuclear deterrence works — until it fails. On the subcontinent, it could fail catastrophically if India's leaders miscalculated and if Pakistan's nuclear bluff was called. Nor is the balancing of weapon system by weapon system an affordable option for Pakistan. The widening gap in conventional capabilities will call into question the credibility of Pakistan's nuclear posture, since the first use of nuclear weapons will pose an existential threat to both combatants. Pakistan will be placed in an untenable position if it uses nuclear weapons first in a military confrontation triggered by sub-conventional warfare against India.

Pakistan's nuclear posture of offensive defense poses serious problems of deterrence stability. The integration of tactical or short-range nuclear-capable delivery systems into a conventional defense of Pakistan adds serious problems of horizontal and vertical escalation. The probability that Pakistan will use nuclear weapons is commensurate to the size of a concentrated Indian armed attack against vital territorial space. The loss of command and control, the risks of unauthorized use, and the probability of accidents grow as nuclear weapons are situated closer to combatants.19

Pakistan had a firm belief that it will need to further develop nuclear weapon armed submarine for the assured second strike capability, but also that the acquisition of this capability is mandatory for maintaining the deterrence stability and subsequent peace in the region.

Enhancing Deterrence Stability between India and Pakistan

From the preceding analysis on the nuclear stability relationship between India and Pakistan, the question that arises is what needs to be done to enhance deterrence stability

between the two nuclear rivals. Neil Joeck has argued that nuclear deterrence lacked stability for number of reasons including the possibility of war between the two countries over Kashmir, deployment of short-range ballistic missiles, insufficient intelligence capabilities and fragile command and control systems.20 But the fact is that, even after the nuclear tests by both countries, we have seen number of instances such as the Kargil war of 1999, 2001–02 Border Standoff, 2008 Mumbai attacks and the latest one being the 2016 surgical strikes, both sides have resisted from being engaged in a nuclear war.21

During the Kargil crisis, which lasted for two months from May 1999, India maintain restraint in not crossing the LOC which according to Pakistan was the effect of Pakistan's deterrent capability. The Kargil Review Committee Report further reveals the fact that Pakistan was conducting low intensity conflict under a nuclear umbrella, and that Pakistan's nuclear capability had made it difficult for India to escalate the conflict into a conventional war.22

As regards, 2016 surgical strikes, on 29 September 2016, the Director-General of Military Operations (DGMO) of the Indian Army made a statement to the media, at a rare joint press conference of the Ministries of Defence and External Affairs. This statement contains several signals of reassurance, although it concludes with a clear signal of threat for the future:

". . . the Indian Armed Forces are fully prepared for any contingency that may arise. It is India's intention to maintain peace and tranquillity in the region. But we cannot allow the terrorists to operate across the Line of Control with impunity and attack citizens of our country at will. . . we expect the Pakistani army to cooperate with us to erase the menace of terrorism from the region."23

The statement reads: Based on very credible and specific information which we received yesterday that some terrorist teams had positioned themselves at launch pads along the Line of Control with an aim to carry out infiltration and terrorist strikes in Jammu & Kashmir and in various other metros in our country, the Indian army conducted surgical strikes last night at these launch pads. The operations were basically focused to ensure that these terrorists do not succeed in their design of infiltration and carrying out destruction and endangering the lives of citizens of our country.

The political climate between the two countries must be improved to ensure that strong political impulse to destabilize deterrence is not created. This can be ensured if the

ongoing political dialogue moves from 'procedural' to 'meaningful' stage. From the political stand point, these talks must create hope that progress is being made towards the settlement of the fundamental cause of conflict, which is the Kashmir Dispute. From the military stand point, efforts in the direction of arms control are not likely to succeed as India's strategic outlook goes much beyond Pakistan. Even it will be very difficult to reach an agreement on what are 'Pakistan specific' military capabilities, it is therefore recommend that efforts be made to develop a 'Deterrence Stabilization Regime' with the aim of enhancing deterrence stability across the entire spectrum of conflict. Such a regime should include tangible mechanisms to enable both sides to verify that the agreed upon stabilization measures are being actually implemented. Some of the parameters of this regime could be:-

a. India will have to be convinced that Pakistan is not complicit-either actively or tacitly- in the terrorist activities of non state actors based in Pakistan. Also, that across the board action is being taken to dismantle all terror/militant networks.

b. Conversely, Pakistan must be convinced that deterrence stability between the two countries will not remain hostage to the activities of autonomous non state terror networks. This involves a clear understanding that there will be no conventional retaliation in the event of a terrorist attack.

c. A structured framework should be developed that facilitates cooperation and intelligence sharing against terror networks, along with an agreed upon response mechanism that springs into action, should a terror attack materialize. This will obviate the knee jerk responses we saw on both sides, in the immediate aftermath of the Mumbai attacks.

d. The emerging conventional postures envisage quick response capabilities through increased mobility and forward positioning of forces, this will cause significant crisis instability as the window for mediation during a crisis will be very restricted. There is a need to build in adequate and reliable recess in the respective conventional military postures.

e. Assessing threat and developing a response is a sovereign prerogative. It seems that the security managers of Pakistan feel that the emerging conventional threat from India can only be effectively deterred through an appropriate combination of conventional and nuclear means.

Reducing Risks for Use of Nuclear Weapons in South Asia

Given the trouble security situation that remains in South Asia, it is imperative to introduce transitional measures to reduce the nuclear risks while seeking a path to nuclear disarmament. In this regard, an important set of proposals for nuclear risk reduction measures

between India and Pakistan was released by the Movement in India for Nuclear Disarmament (MIND) in Delhi on 18 June 2002.

Following steps need to be undertaken at the level of nuclear diplomacy, education, policy and doctrine to reduce the future nuclear risks between the two South Asian rivals:

1. Holding nuclear risk reduction dialogues on regular basis- Such dialogues need to be completely separated from the Kashmir issue, a point of view that Pakistan must be brought around to. Shared understandings are vital to underpin nuclear crisis management by adversaries.

2. Develop mutual understanding that neither of two sides will target and destroy the leadership of the other and to keep nuclear weapons command centers from urban centers - Attacking political and military leadership with a view to destroying nuclear command and control is likely to be a strong incentive in early use of nuclear weapons. And nuclear command centers should not only be far from civilian populations but also from nuclear weapons storage or deployment sites.

3. Declare a policy of not targeting cities - Nothing can ever justify the deliberate targeting of a civilian population, especially with a nuclear weapon. The population densities of the mega-cities of India and Pakistan ensure that any nuclear attack would lead to hundreds of thousands of immediate fatalities. It should be avoided at all costs.24

4. Nuclear CBMs need to be strengthened - both countries could consider Nuclear Confidence Building Centers (NCBCs) on the models of Nuclear Risk Reduction Centers (NRRCs) which were established between the US and the former Soviet Union.25

Conclusion

Nuclear Deterrence between the two South Asian rivals is becoming less stable and unpredictable with the passage of time and an increase in nuclear weapon capabilities. As such, India and Pakistan have not addressed basic issues in dispute, nor have they agreed to set them aside. Deterrence stability will only be sustainable if a substantive political discourse is seen as making headway towards the solution of critical political issues that divide the two countries. Deterrence stability between Pakistan and India is challenging because of asymmetries of power, close proximity, a record of misreading each other's intentions, and a history of war and crises. Deterrence stability is even harder to achieve because of the key elements of Pakistan's strategic culture.

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