National Security Journal

http://nationalsecurityjournal.nz

Published by:
Centre for Defence
and Security Studies,
Massey University

ISSN: 2703-1926 (print) *ISSN: 2703-1934 (online)*

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To cite this article: Sharma, A. (2021). Challenges in Nuclear Posture and Deterrence from India's Perspective. *National Security Journal*. Published 24 December 2021. doi: 10.36878/nsj20211224.04

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.36878/nsj20211224.04

View CrossRef data: https://search.crossref.org/?q=10.36878%2Fnsj20211224.04

Journal Article published 24 December 2021 in National Security Journal.

CHALLENGES IN NUCLEAR POSTURE AND DETERRENCE FROM INDIA'S PERSPECTIVE

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South Asia comprises eight countries, among which India and Pakistan are two nuclear weapon powers marked by strained relations. Within this dynamic, this essay examines India's nuclear path, in spite of its staunch support for a nuclear-weapon-free world. It covers Pakistan's nuclear journey through proliferation and the logic for it to perpetrate state-sponsored terrorism against India, arguing that this serves as a major factor that could lead to war. Despite this potential, it also explains why South Asia is not the most dangerous nuclear flashpoint in the world. In addition to India and Pakistan, five other nuclear nations are present in the region, namely China, Russia, Israel, North Korea and the United States. As such, this essay discusses positive and negative effects of each of these powers on nuclear dynamics of the region. It concludes with recommendations for fostering strategic stability in South Asia.

Key Words: South Asia, terrorism, nuclear flashpoint, strategic stability

Introduction

South Asia comprises eight countries among which only two are nuclear-armed states, namely India and Pakistan. Relations between these two countries have been strained from their independence in 1947, two years after the atomic age dawned upon the world with the US use of nuclear weapons against Hiroshima and Nagasaki.[1] Having seen the devastation that had taken place, Indian leaders felt that these weapons were not for warfighting as they brought only destruction. However, even though India always stood for a nuclear-weapons-free world, it became a nuclear-armed state in 1998.[2] Weaponi-

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sation was not because of political considerations or national prestige. The only touchstone that guided it was national security. This essay will explore challenges to nuclear posture and deterrence to better understand strategic dynamics in South Asia.

India's Nuclear Posture Evolution

The strategic environment surrounding India from the 1960s was integral to India's decision to pursue a nuclear arsenal. Following China's nuclear test in 1964, the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) established a divide between the nuclear haves and the have nots with its signature in 1968.[3] During the Bangladesh War of Independence in 1971, India's sense of vulnerability was further heightened by the China-US axis targeting India and US coercive diplomacy in moving its Seventh Fleet into the Bay of Bengal.[4]

The resulting break-up of Pakistan and establishment of Bangladesh culminated in over 93,000 Pakistanis being taken as prisoners of war.[5] Unable to match India's superiority in conventional military forces, the Pakistani Army Chief and later President, General Zia ul Haq, enunciated a doctrine of bleeding India with a 'thousand cuts' to avenge the humiliating defeat of 1971.[6] Since then, Pakistan has viewed terrorism as a means of irregular warfare to ensure some form of parity with India, resulting in its application in Punjab, Kashmir and other parts of India.

The following year, in 1972, Pakistan's Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto announced his decision for the country to develop nuclear weapons at the Multan conference.[7] By 1987, Pakistan reportedly created a nuclear weapon with Chinese assistance.[8] During this period, the United States looked the other way due to its interests in Afghanistan, while the Pakistan Inter-Services Intelligence-backed Khalistan movement in Punjab was gaining ground.[9] Moreover, control of Pakistan's nuclear weapons programme, which till now was with the civilian government, passed into the hands of the military.[10]

With the collapse of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) in 1991 and US engagement of Pakistan, Indian security concerns further deepened. India was left with no option but to stand up for its own security interests and conducted Operation Shakti, a series of five nuclear tests 1998, followed by five nuclear tests by Pakistan.[11] After four years of intensive discussions and a draft doctrine issued in 1999, India announced its nuclear doctrine in January 2003.[12]

Within India's eight-point nuclear doctrine, four points are key. First, India seeks to build and maintain a credible minimum deterrent. Second, India maintains a no first use (NFU) posture, such that nuclear weapons will be used in retaliation against a nuclear attack on Indian forces anywhere.[13] Third, India's nuclear retaliation against a first strike will be massive and designed to inflict unacceptable damage. Fourth, India supports non-proliferation and verifiable, non-discriminatory nuclear disarmament. By

contrast, Pakistan's nuclear posture is predicated upon a purely anti-India posture of first use, based on full spectrum deterrence through the deployment of tactical nuclear weapons for war fighting.[14]

Nuclear Challenges and External Actors in South Asia

Nuclear Dyads

Of the nine nuclear powers in the world, seven may be factored into nuclear dynamics in South Asia, namely India, Pakistan, China, Russia, Israel, North Korea and the United States. Among these, the United States is included because of its extended responsibilities in the region, while China, Russia and North Korea also have an impact as external powers. Within this series of relations, South Asian strategic dynamics could be said to exist in a range of dyads, namely China-United States, China-India, Pakistan-India and China-Pakistan.

While Russia does not factor into these dyads, it retains its regional impact as India's time-tested friend and arms supplier, while maintaining cordial relations with China, Pakistan, among other countries in the Indo-Pacific region.[15] While also outside of these dyads, Israel has served as an arms and technology supplier to South Asia, and North Korea's targeting of Japan and South Korea has had a destabilising effect on the region.

Among those countries with the greatest impact on South Asia and its nuclear dyads, however, are the United States and China. The United States has major stakes in the region as a global power. Its presence helps to curtail China's aggressive designs in the Indo-Pacific region and brings stability, in particular for its allies. China aims to be a global power at the level of the United States. To this end, China has engaged in modernising and expanding its nuclear arsenal.[16]

As it impacts South Asia, China continues to refuse to recognise India as a nuclear weapons power and hyphenates it with Pakistan. To keep India embroiled in the region, China has over the years helped Pakistan in all spheres including in development of nuclear weapons.[17] To establish a credible deterrence posture vis-à-vis the United States, China has expanded and modernised its nuclear programme. This has resulted in Pakistan and India following suit, creating a major challenge in the region.

The role of external nuclear powers raises the question of whether nuclear dynamics among these countries will lead to increased strategic instability. Indications are that they will. Furthermore, the presence of increasingly high-precision and high-speed lethal weapons is bound to increase insecurity leading to strategic instability. Nevertheless, if India maintains a dynamic deterrence based on threat perceptions and retains a credible deterrence posture against both China and Pakistan, strategic stability will remain. But this is not without ongoing challenges in terms of terrorism and proliferation.

Terrorism and Proliferation

Terrorism is a major threat in South Asia, with Pakistan having used terrorism as a state-sponsored policy against India for decades. Economic, political, military and strategic patronage from China further incentivises Pakistan to continue despite the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) having placed the latter on the grey list since 2018.[18] Radicalism and the influence of terrorists continues to grow within the country, even eliciting censure of US traditional support for Pakistan in the memoirs of former US President Barack Obama.[19]

Within this background, one of the largest misconceptions about South Asia is that the India-Pakistan border is the most dangerous nuclear flash point in the world. This is a myth propagated by Pakistan to enable it to carry on with acts of terrorism or intrusions, as in Kargil, against India.[20] Pakistan tries to sell the belief that a strong conventional response by India to a major terrorist act would force Pakistan to resort to the use of tactical nuclear weapons to safeguard its territorial interests, thereby leading to nuclear war.

This method is used to compel the world to prevail upon India not to take strong measures against Pakistan to avoid a nuclear confrontation. It represents pure brinkmanship and even nuclear blackmail for two reasons. First, the highest concern in a conflict between nuclear-armed countries is when one adversary feels cornered and desperate, tempting it to act irrationally and to launch in panic. However, India's no-first-use (NFU) pledge logically negates this possibility contributing to strategic stability. Second, it is hoped that Pakistan's Army realises that India's response to even limited use would be massive to inflict unacceptable damage and would not risk taking such a catastrophic step.[21]

As evidence of this logic, Pakistan's retired General and former President Pervez Musharraf in an interview in 2017, recalled the situation after a terrorist attack on the Indian Parliament resulted in a major mobilisation by India in 2001. Musharraf stated there was a 'danger when (the) nuclear threshold could have been crossed' and that he had spent many sleepless nights asking himself whether he could or would deploy nuclear weapons and decided against it, for fear of Indian retaliation. 'We didn't do that and we don't think India also did that, thank God'.[22]

This leads to the next challenge in South Asia, the control of Pakistan's nuclear arsenal. Presently, it is under the control of a professional army. Yet with increasing radicalism and now with a Taliban government in Afghanistan the future of the safety of nuclear weapons is worrisome.[23] Further, Pakistani entities have engaged in proliferation.[24]

Among its recipients, North Korea has pursued a nuclear programme for decades through proliferation and assistance from China and Pakistan.[25] In 2017, and thereafter, North Korea has threatened South Korea, Japan and the United States, professing

the capability of launching a nuclear strike capable of reaching these countries.[26] While North Korea's capabilities remain questionable, it certainly creates uncertainty and its proliferation assistance from Pakistan constitutes a destabilising factor.

Conclusion

In light of the above challenges, institutionalised nuclear dialogue and the establishment of confidence building measures are essential for peace and stability in South Asia. However, these are dependent upon willingness on the part of the various countries to engage. In the case of Pakistan, it is apparent that even when the elected government wants to improve relations with India, the Pakistan Army and Inter-Services Intelligence prevent this from occurring.

Two major instances illustrate this stark reality. In February 1999, India's former Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee and Pakistan's former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif signed the historic Lahore Accord to foster peace and stability between the two nations.[27] However, within three months the two sides were at war in Kargil, as Pakistan Army soldiers in the garb of irregulars had infiltrated and occupied Indian territory.[28]

Again, in December 2015, India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi, while returning from Kabul, made an unscheduled stopover in Pakistan to greet Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif on his birthday and his granddaughters wedding as a gesture of goodwill and friendship. Two weeks later, an Indian Air Force base was attacked by Pakistan-based terrorists.[29] Such incidents of terrorism continue on a regular basis even today.

Furthermore, while China is a major player in South Asia, it has not played a role conducive to institutionalised nuclear dialogue and confidence building measures in South Asia. It suits China to keep India embroiled with Pakistan, as it strives to translate its economic and military strength into regional hegemony. As a result, there are fewer inducements for India to engage China.

Instead, the impetus is to counter China's predatory economics and military aggressiveness in South Asia and the Indo-Pacific region through formalisation of such mechanisms as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue[30] into a military alliance. Facing the multilateralisation of these challenges and mechanisms, including as they apply in South Asia, it is important that such powers as China, Russia and the United States also engage on nuclear confidence-building measures, including NFU, to enable strategic stability to prevail.

In pursuing dialogue, one potential avenue could stem from India's and China's similar approaches towards nuclear weapons. Both India and China are nuclear powers with NFU postures and maintain that possession of nuclear weapons that can destroy targets many times over is of no utility. In their view, numbers and technology beyond a

threshold do not result in more gains and the coefficient of effectiveness diminishes.[31] If such similarities are utilised as foundations for engagement, then there remains the potential to address some of the challenges facing South Asia.

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