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# CHALLENGES IN NUCLEAR POSTURE AND DETERRENCE FROM CHINA'S PERSPECTIVE

Wang Dehua<sup>1</sup>

South Asia is one of the most vulnerable regions in the world today. Since India and Pakistan embarked on their path of open nuclear weapons development with their nuclear tests in 1998, nuclear deterrence between the two countries has become an important pillar within the South Asian security architecture. As strategic stability in the region is increasingly fragile, a number of these factors also impact China's security, through economic and political fallout, as well as nuclear impacts on deterrence, arms races and crisis stability. The ongoing Kashmir dispute, challenges to the Treaty on the Non-proliferation of Nuclear Weapons and Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty, as well as shifting nuclear postures and Indo-Pacific strategies all merit greater attention. This essay will address these trends, in addition to how China's South Asia policy may best prioritise the enhancement of nuclear stability in the region.

Key words: South Asia, nuclear, deterrence, treaty on the non-proliferation of nuclear weapons, comprehensive test ban treaty

## Introduction

South Asia is one of the most vulnerable regions in the world today, marked by increasingly fragile strategic stability.<sup>1</sup> Ever since India and Pakistan conducted their nuclear tests in 1998, nuclear deterrence between the two countries has become an integral part

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of the South Asian security architecture. Conflicts between India and Pakistan near the Kashmir border are frequent and marked by two commonalities, namely the outcome is often the same and India tends to undertake the initiative first.

This construct leads to questions as to whether India could attack Pakistan without cause and whether or not recent conflicts could escalate into a nuclear war. Within these dynamics, the primary role of China is to guard against nuclear arm's racing between India and Pakistan, while strengthening the Treaty on the Non-proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) and the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT). This essay will discuss some of the key challenges faced by India and Pakistan, and how China may play a constructive role.

### **India and Pakistan: Kashmir Issue**

Nuclear-armed adversaries India and Pakistan have fought three wars since their formation as sovereign states in 1947. They went to the brink of a fourth war in 2001 following an attack on the Indian parliament, which the Indian government blamed on the Pakistan-backed Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammed terrorist organisations.<sup>2</sup> A new standoff between the two countries was precipitated when India accused Lashkar-e-Taiba of being behind the Mumbai attacks in 2008.<sup>3</sup> Despite attempts at rapprochement in the intervening years, India has repeatedly accused Pakistan of a state policy in support of jihadi elements, especially across the line of control (LOC) in Kashmir.<sup>4</sup>

Most recently, the 2019 events in Pulwama and Balakot have further shown the dangers of escalation in the region. Nuclear dimensions of these incidents were foreshadowed by India's use of surgical strikes and combat aircraft at Pulwama and its deployment of major combat units of the Navy. These include the carrier battle group with INS Vikramaditya, nuclear submarines and numerous other ships. In the wake of Balakot, submarines and aircraft swiftly transited from exercise to operational deployment as tensions between India and Pakistan escalated.<sup>5</sup>

To better understand these dynamics, it is important to briefly review the structure of this region. Kashmir is divided into a Pakistan-controlled territory, which covers 37 percent of the region, including Azad Kashmir and the northern areas of Gilgi-Baltistan, and an India-controlled territory, which includes 43 percent of the region and most of Jammu, Kashmir Valley, Ladakh and the Siachen Glacier.<sup>6</sup> Both are contested regions and the de facto partition line between the two is known as the Line of Control (LOC). However, India and Pakistan are not the only claimants. China controls 20 percent of Kashmir, including Aksai Chin, which it occupied after the Sino-Indian War in 1962, and the Shaksam Valley, which was ceded by Pakistan in 1963.

Pakistan claims that Kashmir is a disputed territory whose final status must be determined by the people of Kashmir. According to this view, Indian Army soldiers were

present in Kashmir before the Instrument of Accession was signed on 26 October 1947, such that their presence violated the Standstill Agreement, which was designed to maintain the status quo in Kashmir.<sup>7</sup> By contrast, India argues that Kashmir remains an integral part of its territory and that it maintains sufficient mechanisms and constitutional safeguards to address issues raised by its citizens. This is driven in part by the fact that any concession to the population of Kashmir may open a floodgate of many other similar movements by other ethnic groups. The lengthy history of these competing claims continues to serve as a source of potential escalation, both conventional and nuclear.

### **India, Pakistan and China: The NPT and CTBT**

Alongside conventional and nuclear challenges in South Asia, the international arms control regime is also in flux. The 10th Review Conference of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), postponed until 2022, marks the 50th anniversary of the NPT's entry into force as well as the twenty-fifth anniversary of its indefinite extension.<sup>8</sup> The Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) and NPT are closely linked with each other, since the latter's indefinite extension constitutes an important prerequisite for the success of the CTBT. The realisation of these two interlinked aims is crucial to enhancing the international nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation regime.

The Charter of the United Nations of 1945 explicitly named the Permanent Members of the Security Council, China, France, the former Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR, now Russian Federation), the United Kingdom and the United States.<sup>9</sup> While the NPT was under negotiation, the situation with China was in dispute. As a result, the NPT treaty relies upon an arbitrary date to distinguish nuclear-weapon states (NWS) from non-nuclear-weapon states (NNWS), namely that Article IX defines NWS as those that had manufactured and detonated a nuclear explosive device prior to 1 January 1967. This formulation continues to have an impact on India and Pakistan, which under the treaty's definition would remain NNWS despite their possession of nuclear weapons.

Furthermore, India, Pakistan, Israel and North Korea possess nuclear weapons, but are currently outside the NPT and decline to adhere to it based on their national interests. India remains sceptical about whether states with advanced nuclear programmes would honour Article IV within the NPT regarding universal access to peaceful nuclear technologies, much less their Article VI obligations on negotiating effective measures relating to cessation of the nuclear arms race and nuclear disarmament.

Pakistan's basic policy is that it will join the NPT as soon as India does. Had the NPT been strictly followed and countries like the United States and former USSR not been preoccupied with their own strategic interests, the world would have been a much safer

place. Other signatories to the NPT have also not adhered to the tenets of the treaty. China, a signatory to the NPT, has been a supplier of nuclear technology to Pakistan. Further, even countries outside the NPT like Pakistan have acted all too liberally in trading nuclear technology, bringing the world much closer to a nuclear holocaust.

The fate of the CTBT is firmly interwoven with that of the NPT. Since the conclusion of CTBT, it has become a key pillar for the international nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation architecture. While there have been indications in the past that India and Pakistan might consider signing onto the CTBT, they remain reluctant. In India's case, the treaty's ban of all nuclear explosions would hinder enhancements to nuclear weapons that may be sought in the future. Further, Pakistan's concerns over India's nuclear modernisation programme mean that it has also not signed onto the treaty. Even as both seek Nuclear Supplier's Group membership, they remain reluctant on the CTBT spurred on by the fact that countries like the United States remain a non-party to the treaty.

In trying to make headway on the NPT and CTBT, the world is also grappling with rising unilateralism and acts of hegemonism in current international relations, which have undermined international security. The United States has returned to a Cold War mentality, adopted a more aggressive nuclear strategy and unilaterally withdrawn from and reneged on multilateral agreements, such as the Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces Treaty and Open Skies Treaty.<sup>10</sup>

In doing so, the United States has lowered the threshold of using nuclear weapons and continues to modernise its nuclear forces, even considering the deployment of low-yield nuclear weapons.<sup>11</sup> It has not only made it clear that it will not push for the ratification of the CTBT, but has also shifted its responsibilities onto other countries, claiming that it will resume nuclear testing if necessary. Such negative actions have not only dampened the prospects for CTBT's entry into force, but also further undermined global nuclear strategic stability.

In contrast to India, Pakistan and the United States, China was among the first signatories of CTBT.<sup>12</sup> It has had the fewest nuclear test explosions compared with other nuclear-weapon states. Since it declared the moratorium in 1996, the Chinese government has faithfully honoured its commitment and has never wavered in its political support for the CTBT. China has also actively engaged in international efforts aimed at facilitating its entry into force. It has supported CTBT-related resolutions at successive United Nations General Assembly sessions, suggesting that it will not be an obstacle to the entry into force of the treaty. As such, China can play an important role in serving as an example and strengthening the CTBT.

## India and China: Nuclear Postures

As evidenced by its support for the NPT and CTBT, China has continued to operate with the same basic position on nuclear weapons, shaped by its having been forced down the path of conducting nuclear tests and developing nuclear weapons. China has always advocated for the complete prohibition and thorough destruction of nuclear weapons. In doing so, its possession of nuclear weapons is entirely for defence and to protect the Chinese people from nuclear threats. Furthermore, China has proclaimed that it will not be the first to use nuclear weapons at any time and under any circumstances.<sup>13</sup>

When contrasted with India's nuclear posture, there are some key differences. Both China's and India's nuclear experts have been long perplexed by the differences in each other's approaches to nuclear deterrence. Deterrence, which is predicated upon the threat of retaliation to prevent an enemy attack, is a fundamental principle for India, but not for China. Indian scholars believe that nuclear deterrence is appropriate, while Chinese scholars tend to believe that it has a strong intimidation effect. According to this view, the reason China opposes deterrence is because it is confusing nuclear deterrence with nuclear compellence. Whereas deterrence forces an adversary to abandon an attack and thereby maintains the status quo, compellence operates from the view that a threat can force a rival to take action it does not wish to, thereby changing the status quo.

Rather than understanding and accepting China's nuclear posture, during the Cold War, the United States, the former Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) and the United Kingdom tended to largely share India's views on nuclear threats stemming from China. However, the possibility of a joint guarantee from all three was remote. India seemed to be well aware of these countries' unwillingness to provide ironclad and formal guarantees to counter China for a variety of reasons.<sup>14</sup> In spite of the fact that India's concerns dated to the Cold War, they continue to this day and are amplified by collaboration with such countries as the United States. This remains an obstacle to better ties with China.

## Conclusion

South Asia retains an important position in the game of major powers both shaping and being shaped by the international order. Recognising this centrality, countries like the United States, Japan and Australia have increasingly formulated and implemented a coordinated Indian Ocean strategy. The latest extenuation of this has been seen with the establishment of the Australia-United Kingdom-United States (AUKUS) nuclear submarine deal.<sup>15</sup> The extent to which India, in particular, ascribes to the Indian Ocean strategy of such countries remains to be seen.

While external powers impact South Asia, the role of India and Pakistan remain central to the region's nuclear dynamic. To this end, there have been a fairly large number of confidence-building measures (CBMs) between India and Pakistan—as with sharing lists of nuclear installations—with the 2021 ceasefire agreement showing some promise.<sup>16</sup> However, a number of previous CBMs neither brought an enduring peace and lasting stability, nor built confidence between the two arch adversaries. For example, India and Pakistan signed memoranda of understanding on security concepts and nuclear doctrines to reduce the risk of accidental or unauthorised use of nuclear weapons, and advance notification on ballistic missile tests during the Lahore Summit in February 1999.<sup>17</sup> Yet this entire process was scuttled in the wake of the Kargil conflict that same year.

With the exception of the Agra summit between India and Pakistan in 2001 that some argued 'almost resolved' the Kashmir dispute, the Bharatiya Janata Party's trend towards populism and domestic political preoccupations have largely prevented it from reviving the process in any substantive manner.<sup>18</sup> The hope is that the India-Pakistan 2021 ceasefire at the border may be the next step in this process. However, ongoing constraints of populism and the nuclear challenges cited above may serve as long-term impediments.

Despite this continuity, the nature of the India-Pakistan conflict has undergone profound changes over the past 20 years. And within this shifting construct, external powers are likely to play an enhanced role in the future. Among these, the China-Russia-India trilateral relationship is an extremely critical part of South Asian multilateral relations. High-level exchanges, confidence-building, mechanism formation and meetings are all important developments among these three countries. Currently, however, there remain internal and external constraints to full realisation of this potential, as the three countries have different strategic goals.

These divergent aims among external powers have led to an imbalance, as have the efforts by the United States to create obstacles to contain China. In light of these impediments, China should place a greater priority upon firmly engaging in China-Russia-India trilateral cooperation. No matter how the international situation may change, China must remain committed to multilateralism, continue to promote international peace and development and work with all parties to build a community with a shared future for humankind.<sup>19</sup> To achieve these goals, China must expand its engagement with not only South Asia as it faces such challenges as the Kashmir dispute. It must also actively pursue stronger multilateral consensus on such integral arms control and disarmament mechanisms as the NPT and CTBT. In doing so, China will be well positioned to make a positive contribution to enhancing nuclear strategic stability in South Asia.

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