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CONTEMPORARY NUCLEAR DYNAMICS IN SOUTHERN ASIA: MANY CHALLENGES, FEW POSSIBILITIES

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SUMMARY

Southern Asia, the region that houses three geographically contiguous and historically antagonistic nuclear armed states, is challenged by a complex nuclear chain dynamic. While the three nations have shown maturity in building nuclear capabilities and handling crises, the need for stabilizing nuclear relations at the bilateral level, and if possible, at the trilateral level, is both clear and complicated at the same time. Taking a rather legalistic position, China refuses to accept the legitimacy of the nuclear weapons of India and Pakistan. While this changes nothing on the ground, the rigid stance constrains possibilities of engagement.

None of the leaders of the three countries have identified nuclear risk reduction as an objective worthy of investing their political capital. Ideas on how to encourage strategic stability in the region need to be explored and kept ready for when the political climate is more accepting of them, or when the sense of danger is better understood. Regions do not exist in a vacuum. The breakdown of US-Russia nuclear arms control architecture and pessimism over US-China dialogue dampens the urgency of nuclear risk reduction efforts in other regions, including in Southern Asia. Therefore, the challenges in how to open a strategic dialogue to foster better understanding of threat perceptions, doctrines, and force postures amongst nuclear dyads are many. But a few possibilities will have to be found to set them down the path.

NUCLEAR DYNAMICS IN SOUTHERN ASIA

Geography binds China, India, and Pakistan together. But historical contestations keep them apart; even combatively engaged at their borders. Both geography and history provide grounds for conflict between the two adversarial nuclear dyads, India-Pakistan and India-China. A third side in this triangular interrelation, the one between China and Pakistan, exists in the form of a strategic nexus characterized by nuclear and missile cooperation. The resultant regional nuclear dynamics in Southern Asia are fraught with many challenges and crisis possibilities; indeed, crises have already occurred. The need for stabilizing nuclear relations forthwith at the bilateral level and, if possible, at the trilateral level, is clear. But the ability to achieve this ideal is constrained by myriad complications.

This paper identifies the multiple nuclear challenges afflicting Southern Asia, some of them, in fact, unique to the trilateral nuclear equation in this region. They form a maze that appears to offer no exits at the moment. Yet, as explored in this paper, there are some opportunities that may present themselves when political relations improve or when all three countries realize that their nuclear destinies are more intertwined than they accept, and that it is in their collective interest to reduce nuclear risks.

MANY CHALLENGES

One of the unique realities of the nuclear dynamic in Southern Asia is that only one of the three nuclear weapon possessors – China – is recognized as a nuclear weapon state per the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT). The other two nuclear-armed states, India and Pakistan, are not signatories to the NPT. China, therefore, refuses to accept the legitimacy of their nuclear weapon status, on a legalistic position. While this does not change the reality of India and Pakistan possessing nuclear weapons, China's rigid stance does constrain possibilities of engagement.

The deterrence relations in Southern Asia are far more complex than the bipolar nuclear confrontation of the Cold War where the nuclear weapons of one side were meant only for deterring those of the other. One key difference is in the role that China, India, and Pakistan assign to their nuclear deterrents. China's nuclear weapons are primarily meant to deter the United States. It particularly fears potential American interference with its plans to unify its many historically claimed territories with the Chinese mainland. Therefore, China's nuclear weapons have been, and continue to be, built with an eye on US conventional and nuclear capability. As the differences between the two have grown in the last decade, so has China's focus on its nuclear capability. At the same time, China's nuclear weapons do also have a role in signaling deterrence vis-à-vis India, whose territories are claimed by China. Its aggressive behaviour with India at the Line of Actual Control, especially since 2020, (though an increase in frequency of incidents can be traced to 2013 onwards) has been matched by a significant growth in its nuclear arsenal.

India's nuclear capability is meant to deter both Pakistan and China. Sandwiched between these two nuclear adversaries who have a close relationship between them, India's threat perceptions include the possibility of a two-front war. Pakistan, on the other hand, maintains that its nuclear weapons are meant to deter only India. Moreover, Pakistan's nuclear weapons are meant to deter India's conventional capability, not just its nuclear weapons. India and China have declared that their nuclear weapons are meant to deter the use or threat of use of nuclear weapons by another state. Evidently then, the target country (or countries) and the role of nuclear weapons in deterrence is quite different for each of the three countries in Southern Asia.

Another interesting difference lies in their perceptions of the nature of relationship that the other has with another third major power. China, for instance, considers the United States as a major adversary and remains wary of its overtures towards India. It views India-United States strategic cooperation, including their partnership in the 'Quad,' as a strategy in which India is teaming up with the United States to contain China's power and influence. India, meanwhile, is discomfited by the increased closeness between Russia and China, which is being described as a 'no-limit' partnership. Given the downturn in the United States-Pakistan relationship over the last few years, the latter too perceives the strengthening of India's relations with the United States as a threat. Conversely, Pakistan's close relations with the United States or Russia cause concern in India.

Much of the threat perceptions of the three countries are fueled by how they view each other's intent. From India's perspective, Pakistan's continued use of cross border terrorism and the hardline stance of the Pakistan Army positioning India as an existential threat are the main problems that stand in the way of improved India-Pakistan relations. In fact, the use of terrorism by one nuclear armed state against another adds to the unique features of Southern Asian nuclear dynamics. For Pakistan, the status of Kashmir is the core issue that must first be resolved before bilateral relations can normalize. Another layer of complexity to this bilateral relationship is added whenever Beijing rallies behind Islamabad and chooses to sympathise with the latter as a victim, rather than a perpetrator of terrorism. This imbroglio strains the three-way relationship in which intentions can be misread, thereby setting into motion a vicious circle of military capability build up.

In fact, it is hardly surprising that over the last couple of decades China, India, and Pakistan have been operationalizing their version of credible nuclear deterrence based on distinct ideas. China initially appeared satisfied with a smaller nuclear arsenal for nearly four decades before beginning to openly display a desire to build a larger arsenal to establish a state of mutual vulnerability vis-à-vis the United States. Driven towards creating nuclear parity as a way of establishing itself as a great power equal to the United States, China has embarked on a significant growth trajectory in its nuclear warhead numbers and capabilities.

India's declared nuclear doctrine expresses its intention to build 'credible minimum deterrence' that is sufficient in size to cause unacceptable damage to the adversary. India has eschewed the need for a large arsenal based on the understanding that the capability of these weapons to inflict massive destruction negates the need for large numbers of such weapons. Rather, it appears to base its calculation of nuclear warhead numbers on the twin criteria of survivability of its arsenal and the adversary's ability to defend itself against incoming Indian missiles.

Pakistan, which initially adopted a credible minimum deterrence posture, has chosen to move to full-spectrum deterrence. This new posture includes the development and deployment of a number of capabilities ranging from tactical nuclear weapons for battlefield use to longer range missiles for strategic purposes. The logic behind this approach is to be able to deter India across a spectrum of conflict scenarios with a range of capabilities best suited to deter each situation.

Along with their arsenal sizes, the manner in which each country practices deterrence is also different. For instance, India clearly states the role, manner of employment, and deployment of its nuclear weapons through a publicly declared doctrine. In contrast, both Pakistan and China prefer ambiguity as a way of enhancing nuclear deterrence. They maintain dual-use systems in their arsenals. In the case of China, these are even co-located at some sites. The resultant risk of entanglement of conventional and nuclear weapon systems is seen as useful for deterring the possibility of conventional war -- from India as in the case of Pakistan, and from the United States as in the case of China.

As each country advances its technological capability, newer weapon systems will likely alter the equation of nuclear deterrence. Some of these capabilities include ballistic missile defences, which are in the research and development stage in India and China, as well as multiple independently-targetable reentry vehicles or MIRVed missiles that have been tested by Pakistan and inducted by China. India has, until now refrained from making any official statements on moving on this front.

All of the above-described differences make any potential efforts at strategic stability very challenging. India is more concerned about the risks of inadvertent escalation because of tactical nuclear weapons or dual use systems, especially during a crisis. Pakistan's vision of strategic stability includes constraints on conventional weapons too. Its proposal for a strategic restraint regime, however, runs aground against India's difficult relationship with China, which creates the necessity for India to build a strong conventional military capability to deter China. Meanwhile, for China, its main threat perception (the United States) actually lies outside the region. For that reason, it finds a regional dialogue on strategic issues unnecessary.

Given all these challenges afflicting Southern Asia, it is not surprising that the prospects of strategic stability appear rather dim. In fact, some of the same conditions that became enablers of strategic stability between the two superpowers during the Cold War are presently absent in the case of China, India, and Pakistan. The Cuban missile crisis had ignited a common sense of danger and hence triggered the desire for achieving stability through arms control measures. Nuclear arsenal parity between the United States and the Soviet Union further encouraged them down that path. But in Southern Asia, there is neither a shared sense of the dangers of nuclear risks between the three nuclear powers nor an expressed desire to address them. In fact, China and Pakistan rely on nuclear risks as a way of enhancing deterrence. Meanwhile India continues to build credibility of its own deterrent with a sense of restraint and responsibility. India, however, has not made any effort at outreach to its adversaries on nuclear risk reduction. In fact, the leaders of the three countries have not identified nuclear risk reduction as an objective worthy of investing their political capital. Rather, urged on by a heightened sense of nationalism, leaders prefer to play it safe and avoid stances that may make them appear weak if they held out a peace proposal to the adversary.

FEW POSSIBILITIES

As is clear from the many challenges identified in the previous section, the possibilities of arriving at meaningful strategic stability-inducing measures is not easy. In any case, there is no likelihood of the three states in Southern Asia agreeing to any numbers-based or quantitative nuclear arms control of the kind that the United States and Russia have undertaken. The only measures that appear feasible in the short to medium term are nuclear confidence building measures (CBMs) that could better enhance mutual understanding & predictability through **better communication**. Some CBMs do exist between India and Pakistan. However, while these have been followed diligently on paper, the trust that they were supposed to induce has remained absent.

These CBMs are still valuable even though not completely successful. The region needs **strategic dialogues** that can foster understanding of the other's threat perceptions, doctrines, and force postures. These would need to be initiated at the appropriate levels, including through the continued use of **Track II diplomacy** to test the waters and explore ideas that can be taken up when the political establishments are ready to officially engage with one another. Meanwhile, if possible, nations should be encouraged to undertake **unilateral or coordinated statements on role of their nuclear weapons and doctrines** as a means to clear misperceptions.

One aspect where deterrence stability can evolve is when nations feel secure in their second-strike capabilities. Therefore, providing **transparency on survivability measures** could assure the other side that no first strike could take out the other side's retaliatory capability. This would ease 'use or lose' pressures and thus reduce the temptation for pre-emption. In this context, the construction of silos, nuclear submarines or SSBNs, and the **robustness of command and control (C2) systems** should be seen as stabilizing developments; just as much as building missile defences, deploying MIRVed missiles, or increasing warhead numbers are retrograde steps. Other possibilities that appear remote for now but which could be considered when the time is right include formalizing low nuclear alert levels and eschewing dual-use missiles based on the understanding that they are liabilities rather than assets.

It would also be useful to maintain **bilateral channels of communication, including military hotlines,** on a permanent basis to quickly transmit clarification of information that has the potential of being misread by the other side. These lines will need to be manned at all times with the assurance that correct information will be communicated with the speed that it deserves. The misfiring of Brahmos from the Indian end in 2022 or the news of the attempt at militants hijacking a Pakistani warship in 2014 are instances that needed **quick and reliable channel of passing information before a crisis** could erupt from a misreading of the situation.

Another idea worthy of implementation is for nations to undertake **joint studies on the effects of nuclear deterrence breakdown** in Southern Asia. Such studies can be led by think tanks, scientific organizations, or even the nuclear centres of excellence that exist in all three countries. Movies, music, and art could also be used as a medium to generate a better understanding of nuclear risks in the region. Such bottom-up efforts could push governments to make more informed policy choices. A more **targeted education of leadership** could also be done through simulation exercises.

Additionally, since all three countries are expanding their civilian nuclear programmes for the production of electricity, it might be in their common interests to learn from each other on how to ensure the highest standards of safety and security. On these two fronts, it might be easier to start with an **exchange of information and best practices**.

Lastly, it needs to be remembered that Southern Asia does not exist in a vacuum. The region is impacted by nuclear developments in other parts of the world, especially amongst the

big powers. The breakdown of US - Russia nuclear arms control architecture and pessimism over US-China dialogue dampens the urgency of nuclear risk reduction in regions like Southern Asia. The language and behaviour of leaders on nuclear matters, too, has an impact on the strength of norms of non-use or non-proliferation. Today, these norms are not as strong as they once appeared to be even a decade ago. Nuclear arms races characterized by an offence-defence spiral, as evident in development and deployment of ballistic missile defenses being countered by development of hypersonic missiles, appear to be the predominant trend of the times. Southern Asia might not be able to buck this trend alone. **A global movement towards strategic stability** is therefore the answer, especially for a region like Southern Asia where the strategic nuclear linkages from the global to the regional are most clear.

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ABOUT APLN

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