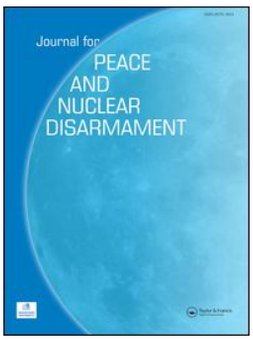

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Geopolitical "Entanglements" and the China-India-Pakistan Nuclear Trilemma

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ABSTRACT

The geopolitical situation in South Asia is witnessing entangled trends, which are reflected as chronic India-Pakistan confrontation, the frigid China-India relationship and the increasing US-China competition. China doesn't want to be involved in the India-Pakistan confrontation, but it's an undeniable fact that the China factor is shaping India-Pakistan interaction to some extent. Though the United States is an extra-regional power, it has a long history of being involved in regional affairs. Considering China, India and Pakistan all possess nuclear weapons, it's extremely important to analyze the geopolitical trends and implications for the nuclear chain. This paper argues that the United States has been focusing on strategic competition against China, and the bilateral relationship will face fierce challenges before reaching new balance. The China-India relationship is becoming competitive and volatile, and the old framework of stabilizing bilateral relations is disintegrating. The conflicting ideology of nation-building, the extremely contradicted security perception, and the battle for geostrategic advantage in the region all contribute to India-Pakistan confrontation. Though nuclear weapons, functioning as a strategic deterrence tool, will curtail concerning parties from large-scale war, and China strongly advocates for a common and cooperative security concept, the geopolitical entanglement will have serious impact on the regional nuclear situation. This paper also gives recommendations for managing this interaction. All concerned parties should strive to overcome the security dilemma and maintain peace and stability in this region by strengthening confidence-building measures, conducting nuclear issue dialogues and improving crisis management mechanisms.

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Introduction[1]

In recent years, the topic of the China-India-Pakistan nuclear chain is becoming increasingly salient, linking geopolitical competition with the nuclear issue (Saalman and Topychkanov 2021a; Topychkanov 2021; Saalman and Topychkanov 2021b; Levesques, Bowen, and Gill 2021; Einhorn and Sidhu 2017; Basrur 2020). There are several reasons for these discussions. First and foremost, the regional geopolitical situation is undergoing

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[1]The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views or positions of any entities.

complex transformations and witnessing extremely urgent crises. Just take a look at some recent incidents concerning China, India and Pakistan. In February 2019, a series of armed clashes occurred between India and Pakistan along and across the Line of Control in the disputed Kashmir region, with the climax of cross-border airstrikes on February 26 and 27. It's the first time since the India-Pakistan war in 1971 that warplanes of either country crossed the Line of Control. It is also the first instance since both states have nuclear weapons (Slater and Constable 2019). In June 2020, the Galwan incident caused military casualties for the first time since 1975, which punched the China-India bilateral relationship to the lowest point since 1988[2] In both incidents, concerned parties deployed a large number of troops near the border area and were on the verge of limited military conflict.

Second, the nuclear issue is an inseparable component of the China-India-Pakistan trilateral relationship. Any serious analyses of the India-Pakistan security relationship cannot overlook the nuclear issue. Pakistan launched a nuclear test in response to India's nuclear test and adopted the policy of "full-spectrum deterrence" (FSD), instead of No First Use (NFU), to deter India from nuclear war or large-scale conventional war. And though the Chinese strategic community seldom discusses the nuclear issue between China and India, India put the nuclear issue into consideration while formulating its national security strategy. India, though, viewed Pakistan as the most immediate rivalry, and considered China as the long-term target for its nuclear program (Zhang 2007). Moreover, India views China-Pakistan civil nuclear cooperation with serious security concerns. It's argued that "the role of China, Pakistan's principal ally, is a rival and perceived as a growing security threat in India, imposing demands on India's nuclear and conventional armaments" (Levesques, Bowen, and Gill 2021). Thus, though China does not intend to be involved in the nuclear chain, the dynamic of the China-India-Pakistan trilateral relationship works.

Last but not the least, the China-India-Pakistan trilateral relationship has wider geopolitical implications. On the one hand, the trilateral relationship cannot be viewed narrowly by the interaction among them. Other factors like the US Indo-Pacific strategy and the Afghanistan issue will impact the trend of the China-India-Pakistan trilateral relationship. For example, under the background of the US whole-of-government competitive strategy against China, India tends to converge with the United States on containing China. Pakistan is also dragged into the dilemma in balancing its relationship with China and the United States, the former as its "iron-brother" and "staunchest partner", while the latter is its major assistance provider. On the other hand, the trilateral relationship will also have global impacts, such as regional peace and security and the global power balance. For example, the frigid China-India relationship might hold back their cooperation within multilateral mechanisms including the BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). Considering that China, India and Pakistan all possess nuclear weapons, the over-spilling impact of the trilateral relationship cannot be overemphasized.

Though the United States and China are not South Asia geographically in a narrow sense, considering their interest in, interaction with and impact on the region, the article

[2]According to Indian media, there are over twenty casualties from the Indian side. On the Chinese side, there arefour fatalities and the commander was severely injured. See Xinhua News Agency (2021)..

analyzes their bilateral relationship and relationship with India and Pakistan so as to have better understanding of the regional geopolitical situation. And the use of China-India-Pakistan nuclear trilemma doesn't mean that China wants to be involved in the India-Pakistan nuclear relationship. China's policy on the nuclear issue is stable, consistent and responsible, though the China factor is taken into consideration by India and Pakistan when they deal with their relationship with each other.

This paper has four sections. The first section analyzes the competitive US-China relationship and its implications for the China-India-Pakistan nuclear trilemma. It's argued that the US strategic competitive policy against China incites India to take an adventuristic China policy and intensifies bloc politics in the region. The United States also shapes the regional power balance in favor of India, forcing disadvantaged Pakistan to increase its strategic deterrence capacity. The second section examines the frigid China-India relationship and its implications for the China-India-Pakistan nuclear trilemma. Though China doesn't want to be involved in the India-Pakistan nuclear interaction, considering the fact of India and Pakistan's divergent strategic perceptions towards China, the China factor cannot be ruled out when analyzing the regional nuclear chain. The third section touches on the chronic India-Pakistan confrontation and its implications. It argues that it's extremely important but also equally difficult for India and Pakistan to reset their relationship from confrontation to cooperation, from maximum security to common security. The conflicting India-Pakistan relationship means that it's difficult to discard the nuclear shadow. The fourth section offers proposals for concerned parties to manage their relationship and the consequent nuclear trilemma.

The Competitive US-China Relations: Return of the Power Politics

The China-US bilateral relationship is one of the most important and interwoven ties in the world. Though there are many thorny issues between China and the United States, both countries navigated bilateral relations through various challenges and benefited from bilateral cooperation since the normalization process in early 1970s. Take economic cooperation as an example. Since the establishment of diplomatic ties, China and the United States have witnessed a 250 times increase of their bilateral trade volume, accounting to one-fifth of the global total. And the two-way investment has jumped from almost zero to nearly US$240 billion. China and the United States also boast of a generally good record in addressing global governance challenges, such as terrorism, climate change, non-proliferation, financial crisis (2008) and SARS (2003).

During the past few years, however, the landscape and dynamics of China-US bilateral relations have changed. In its first National Security Strategy, the Trump administration labeled China as a "strategic competitor", criticizing China of "using economic inducements and penalties, influencing operations, and using implied military threats to persuade other states to heed its political and security agenda"(White House 2017). The Trump administration took a whole-of-government and principled-realism strategy against China, trying to check and contain the rise of China. Thus, the United States launched the trade war, interfered in the South China Sea issue, stirred up Chinese internal matters and pushed forward technology decoupling. Dangerously, the Trump administration preferred to take a "maximum pressure" policy against China. During this period, the bilateral relationship was described as a "free fall" and "more dangerously

unstable than it has been since 1972" (Osnos 2020). The Biden Administration continues its competitive strategy towards China. Its Indo-Pacific strategy document states to "shape the strategic environment in which it (China) operates, building a balance of influence in the world that is maximally favorable to the United States, our allies and partners, and the interests and values we share" (White House 2022a). The National Security Strategy published in October 2022 defines China as "the only competitor with both the intent to reshape the international order and, increasingly, the economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to do it", and vows to take threefold policies toward China, which are "invest", "align" and "compete", so as to out-compete China in the technological, economic, political, military, intelligence and global governance domains (White House 2022b).

Thus, though US officials stated publicly that the United States is not seeking conflict or cold war with China, it's almost certain that the United States will continue its out-competing China strategy, which is widely viewed as a "containment" strategy in China. This containment strategy will definitely provoke strong reaction. The United States labeled China as "assertive" or even "repressive", while China criticized the United States as "hegemony". The Biden administration's National Security Strategy described that the next ten years will be the decisive decade to out-compete China; while the report to the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China stated that "the world has entered a new period of turbulence and change". The report also cautions that China "must therefore be more mindful of potential dangers, be prepared to deal with worst-case scenarios, and be ready to withstand high winds, choppy waters and even dangerous storms" (Xi 2022). Thus, it seems that the China-US relationship will still be difficult in the foreseeable future. Chinese strategist Professor DA Wei from Tsinghua University divided the bilateral relationship since 1972 into three stages, that is "leverage to balance" (Soviet Union, 1972–1989), "engage to shape" (1989–2017) and "out-compete" (2017 afterwards).He pointed out that the bilateral relations at the latest stage have turned negative (Da and Cai 2022).

The US out-competing policy towards China will affect China-India-Pakistan interaction and their nuclear trilemma.

First, the United States has become a salient third-party factor in China-India relations. India's strategic mistrust towards China converges with the strategic goal of the United States to contain China's rise. Thus, ranging from bilateral defense cooperation to multilateral cooperation under the US-India-Japan-Australia partnership (QUAD), India becomes an important partner in US efforts to contain China. Though India claims to take strategic autonomy, China is worried that India has been gradually deviating from the traditional "non-alignment" policy. Combined with the existing differences between them, China and India take divergent attitudes toward the United States, which leave room for the latter to sow discord. Take the Indo-Pacific strategy as an example. While India embraces the strategy and commences its own Indo-Pacific vision, China is strongly against it. It's widely argued in the Chinese strategic community that the US Indo-Pacific strategy is aiming to encircle China and is detrimental to regional stability (Zhang 2021; Ling 2020; Wei 2021). The issue of India's entry into Nuclear Supplier Group (NSG) is another case. Considering the geopolitical realities in South Asia and the seriousness of the global multilateral mechanism, China takes a cautious and responsible stand on the issue of non-NPT (the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear

Weapons) members' entry into NSG. But India tends to think that China blocks India's entry into NSG to prevent India's pursuit of global power status.

Second, India tends to take a more assertive or even provocative policy against China. Once upon a time, India had a sense of distrust towards both China and the United States and even worried about the "Sino-US co-governance". But nowadays, India prefers to gain from the geopolitical competition between China and the United States. The United States highly values India as a counterweight against China. The declassified *US Strategic Framework for the Indo-Pacific* states that the United States will "offer support to India–through diplomatic, military, and intelligence channels–to help address continental challenges such as the border dispute with China and access to water, including the Brahmaputra and other rivers facing diversion by China" (US National Security Council 2021). In response, India is more open to accept the United States' support to balance China. This can be reflected by India's acceptance of the presence of the United States at its immediate neighborhood and closer military cooperation. Thus, emboldened by the US support, India tends to take a more hawkish policy towards China. One dangerous hint of the trend is that the United States might provide some indirect support for India to strengthen India's nuclear deterrence capability. For example, strategist Ashley Tellis proposed to copy the model of Australia-United Kingdom-United States Partnership (AUKUS) to set up INFRUS (India, France and the United States) and encourage France to help India strengthen its nuclear deterrent capability (Tellis 2022).

Third, the United States devotes more resources to India than Pakistan, aggravating the strategic imbalance in South Asia. The United States ranked geopolitical competition as a more serious challenge than global terrorism. It's widely argued that the United States ended the Afghanistan war so as to focus on geopolitical competition with China and Russia. Pakistan has sacrificed a lot by supporting the US counter-terrorism war on terror in Afghanistan, but under the new grand strategy of the United States, India is one of its most valuable partners. Thus, the US South Asia policy will be more India-centered, which will lead to further strategic imbalance between India and Pakistan, intensifying both India's assertiveness and Pakistan's security concerns. Besides, the United States took a different attitude towards India's and Pakistan's nuclear issue, inciting Pakistan's opposition. The United States approached the NSG to grant a waiver to India to commence civilian nuclear trade and signed a Civil Nuclear Agreement with India in 2008. The United States also supports India's entry into the NSG. In the meantime, the United States accused Pakistan of nuclear proliferation to the DPRK and was worried about its nuclear facilities' safety and security.US President Biden even described Pakistan as "maybe one of the most dangerous nations in the world" because of "nuclear weapons without any cohesion". To sum up, the US strategy might push Pakistan toward a more disadvantaged status compared to India and force Pakistan to develop nuclear capability to maintain strategic balance.

The Frigid China-India Relationship: Reconstructing the Old Framework

Since independence in the late 1940s, China and India witnessed ups and downs in their bilateral relationship, with the 1962 war as the lowest point. But after the normalization of relations in 1988, China and India strived to set up some kind of framework, assuring the relationship might move through various challenges and remain relatively stable.

Generally speaking, this framework consists of the following: both countries agreed to set aside the border dispute while improving their overall relationship and making efforts to maintain the peace and tranquility of the border area, both countries view each other as a development opportunity instead of threats and share common interest in promoting economic cooperation, and both countries will not object the other's rising and will carry forward cooperation in the international arena[3] This framework, however, is facing increasing challenges and is integrating at a rapid pace. Some negative features and trends are described below.

First and foremost, India reconnects the border issue with the development of an overall bilateral relationship. Since the Modi government came into power, India has considered it more pressing to convince China to solve the boundary issue. It was reported that during his visit to China in May 2015, Indian Prime Minister Modi conveyed the message that "if we (China and India) want the full potential of the relationship to be realized we must address outstanding issues ... in a pleasant but forthright manner" (Economic Times 2015). Partly due to rising nationalism at home and a hawkish national security team, and partly due to the speculation that it can benefit from the US competitive strategy against China, India tends to take an assertive stance on the border issue. Thus, there are more tense incidents during the past few years along the border area, including but not limited to the Dong Lang (Doklam) standoff in 2017 and the Galwan incident in 2020. Indian External Affairs Minister (EAM) Jaishankar stated that "it (China-India relationship) cannot be normal, if the situation in the border areas is abnormal" (Ministry of External Affairs 2022). Considering the sensitivity and complexity of the border issue, India's stance makes it difficult to reset the bilateral relationship. Chinese strategist YE Hailin has pointed out pessimistically that "the statements and actions of the Indian government during the China-India border standoff in 2020 have fully demonstrated that the boundary issue has become the core issue shaping the future trend of China-India relations, despite Chinese unwillingness and Indian denial. The positions of the two sides on this issue are too far apart to be reconciled, so it may be difficult for China-India relations in the future to push forward the resolution of the boundary issue and cooperation in other areas" (Ye 2020).

Second, the role of economic cooperation in stabilizing the bilateral relationship is being diluted. China and India, as the two largest developing countries, share common development goals and cherish the developmental partnership as the core of bilateral strategic partnership. During the past several decades, despite issues such as the anti-dumping tariff and the trade deficit, China-India bilateral economic cooperation keeps moving forward. These years, however, India takes a more negative attitude towards bilateral economic cooperation. Moreover, with the returning of power politics and geopolitical competition, major powers emphasize security issues more than previously. Development issues are more frequently to be examined from a security perspective. The US encirclement strategy against China, the outbreak of Covid-19 and the shock of the Ukraine crisis all aggravate this trend. Against this backdrop, India is not as enthusiastic

[3]India's former National Security Advisor Shivshankar Menon summarized the strategic framework as follows: negotiations on the boundary question while preserving the status quo on the boundary; not allowing bilateral differences like the boundary to prevent bilateral functional cooperation; and cooperating where possible in the international arena. In practice, each stayed out of the other's way internationally while concentrating on internal development and growth. See Menon (2020, 16).

about promoting economic cooperation with China compared to the past. India cares more about the security and resilience of its supply chains, trying to reduce the supply chain dependence on China. India also resonates with US strategy to reshape the global supply chain and takes a harsh policy towards Chinese investment. It's argued by Chinese scholar Dr. WANG Rui that "India has taken the opportunity to introduce discriminatory economic policies against China in an attempt to establish De-Sinicization industrial and supply chains to decouple its economy from China" (Wang et al. 2020).

Third, China and India face a more competitive relationship regionally and even globally to some extent. With the simultaneous rise of China and India, it's quite natural that the two countries' interests and presence extend and overlap with each other. Due to the lack of mutual strategic trust, this kind of overlapping raises concerns from India's side. India has a strong mindset of regarding its immediate neighborhood as some kind of "backyard". Thus, India is concerned about China's increasing presence in the South Asian region. India also becomes more passive in cooperating with China at multilateral platforms. For example, in the latest council of the heads of state of the SCO in September 2022, India didn't sign statements on food security, energy security, or on ensuring reliable, sustainable and diversified supply chains. As to the Quad, Indian External Affairs Minister Dr. S. Jaishankar stated that "if there are reservations in any quarter (about the Quad), these stem from a desire to exercise a veto on the choices of others. And possibly a unilateralist opposition to collective and cooperative endeavours" (Jaishankar 2022).

Though there are increasing voices, particularly from the Chinese side, for resetting the icy bilateral relationship as soon as possible, the road ahead is quite bumpy. From the Chinese perspective, India forsakes its non-alignment policy and becomes part of the US containing strategy against China. From the Indian perspective, China backs Pakistan and enters into India's South Asia backyard. India tends to view China as "the most significant challenge in India's external security policies in the coming decade" and argues that "India's China policy must now be reset to the reality of a live border and of antagonistic political relations" (Aiyar and Khilnani et al. 2021). And the concern that India would probably take an assertive policy towards China is widely shared in the Chinese strategic community (Hu and Wang 2020; Lou 2020; Feng 2019). This tense China-India relationship will surely impact the China-India-Pakistan nuclear trilemma.

As to the nuclear deterrence between China and India, the good and bad of bilateral relations will not have a huge impact. Though China and India continue to modernize their nuclear arsenals respectively, since both countries adopt the no-first-use nuclear doctrine, it's almost impossible for them to resort to nuclear weapons to solve differences. As to the India-Pakistan nuclear interaction, however, the intense China-India relationship may have some impacts, though it's against Chinese willingness.

On the one hand, the China threat perception is one important dynamic for Indian decision-makers to develop nuclear deterrence capability. The worsening bilateral security relationship may further contribute to India's nuclear program. And while India wants to improve its nuclear deterrence capability against China, its nuclear modernization will stimulate Pakistan's nuclear program. On the other hand, India becomes more worried about the hypothetical two front wars against China and Pakistan. The Indian strategic community tends to analyze the India-Pakistan confrontation from the China-India-Pakistan perspective. Shivshankar Menon, India's former national security advisor,

points out that "India's Pakistan problem now is in large part a China problem, because it is China that enhances Pakistan's capabilities, keeping it one step behind India at each stage of its nuclear progress, building up its defense, and committing to its long-term future in the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor" (Menon 2020). Though China doesn't offer any formal nuclear security guarantees to Pakistan, and it's unlikely that China and Pakistan would coordinate a nuclear attack on India, some observers in India see the threat of a nuclear war with both China and Pakistan as a potential (Badri-Maharaj 2020). Chinese scholar ZHANG Jiegen also admitted that "whether China likes it or not, China is often passively involved in the game of nuclear arms race and stability in South Asia" (Zhang 2014).

The Conflicting India-Pakistan Relationship: High-Risk Conundrum

Since their independence, India and Pakistan have witnessed harsh bilateral relations, with three large-scale wars between them. Even after they conducted the nuclear test in 1998, there were some serious crises that placed India and Pakistan on the verge of large-scale war and South Asia under the "nuclear shadow". Though both countries have very strict chain-of-command systems and show restraint concerning the use of nuclear weapons, the protracted rivalry between India and Pakistan may still pose the most serious risk for nuclear escalation in the world. The causes for the India-Pakistan conundrum are quite complex and are mixed with historical, religious and geopolitical factors. All these long-term factors combined with current new challenges determine that India-Pakistan confrontation will not be mitigated in the near future.

The deep-rooted cause for the India-Pakistan conundrum is their different ideology of nation-building and the resulting partition of India and Pakistan. The different ideology of nation-building, closely linked with religious beliefs, sowed the seeds of confrontation between India and Pakistan, with the Kashmir issue as the core problem. During the past few years, this issue became more tense. Since coming to power in 2014, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government vigorously pushed forward the Hindutva agenda, such as the revoking of Article 370, the building of the Ram temple at Ayodhya, and the implementation of the Citizenship Amendment Act (2019). These policies not only incited debates and protests at home, but they also had external implications. Take as an example the revoking of Article 370 of the Indian Constitution granting "special status" to Indian-administrated Kashmir. The Kashmir issue is viewed as highly relevant to nation-building for both India and Pakistan. Pakistan reacted strongly through political and diplomatic channels, and the Pakistan army vowed to "go to any extent" to support the people of Kashmir (Shahzad 2019). Furthermore, the Indian government announced the bifurcation of disputed Jammu & Kashmir into Ladakh Union Territory and Jammu & Kashmir Union Territory. India's action severely undermined China's territorial sovereignty since India included Chinese territory in the western sector of the China-India boundary into its administrative jurisdiction (Hua 2019). Since BJP is expected to be the dominant national political power in India over the next few years (Vaishnav and Hintson 2019), it's highly possible that BJP will continue its political agenda and the India-Pakistan relations will continue to worsen.

The second dynamic for the India-Pakistan conundrum is their contradicted security perception. Pakistan consistently views India as its most serious external existential

threat. India may view China as the most serious long-term threat but views Pakistan as its most immediate challenge. India and Pakistan fought several times in history, and there are many cross-border fires/casualties along the Line of Control. The threat perception against each other leads to India-Pakistan competition and confrontation at various levels and in various forms. From the conventional security perspective, there is an arms race between India and Pakistan and the possibility of limited war cannot be ruled out. India's "Cold Start" doctrine, aiming to launch sudden, shallow thrusts inside Pakistani territory, is watched alertly by Pakistan. Pakistan also increasingly raises the possibility of an attack resulting from a supposed "false flag" operation and "ill-conceived misadventure" by India (Khan 2020). On 9 March 2022, an Indian BrahMos missile was "accidentally" fired into Pakistan. Though the incident didn't lead to casualties, it cannot be ruled out that this kind of "accident" will lead to escalation. From the non-traditional security perspective, both countries accuse the other of supporting a "proxy war" and "terrorism/insurgency" against itself.

Last but not the least, India and Pakistan aim to gain geostrategic advantage against each other. During the Cold War period, Pakistan allied with the United States and India leaned towards the Soviet Union. The China factor was also considered by both India's and Pakistan's decision-makers in gaining strategic leverage. The 1962 India-China border conflict and the Pakistan's bridging role in normalizing US-China relations in 1971–1972 contributed to closer China-Pakistan cooperation. This geopolitical landscape changed totally after the end of Cold War. The collapse of the Soviet Union shocked India and pushed India to take a more positive policy towards the United States. Despite the setback after India's nuclear test in 1998, the US-India relationship progressed well. On the contrary, Pakistan's status in the US foreign policy radar is devalued in general, even though Pakistan became a non-NATO ally in the so-called Global War on Terrorism and suffered huge sacrifices due to joining the war. India's advantageous posture mainly derives from its rising power but also can be attributed to increasing US geopolitical support. It's obvious that the United States prefers India quite well in its South Asian strategy, keeping in mind India's strategic value in balancing against China. In response, Pakistan tries to solidify cooperation with China, including diplomatic and defense cooperation, to balance the challenges from India. The India-Pakistan battle for influence in Afghanistan is another example. With the withdrawal of American troops from Afghanistan and Taliban's return to power, the regional strategic power balance and geopolitical environment underwent major change. It's highly likely that India and Pakistan will battle for strategic influence in Afghanistan.

From the nuclear perspective, the implication of the conflicting India-Pakistan relationship is that the escalation of conflicts to a nuclear level cannot be totally ruled out. Though, considering the catastrophic outcomes, it's almost impossible for India and Pakistan to launch nuclear attacks against each other. The "nuclear shadow" will be there. India and Pakistan take different nuclear doctrine. India released its Draft Nuclear Doctrine (DND) in August 1999 and replaced it with official nuclear doctrine in January 2003. "No First Use" and "Credible Minimum Deterrent" are two key principles of India's nuclear doctrine, but India also emphasized "massive retaliation" and "retaliating with nuclear weapons in the event of a major attack against India, or Indian forces anywhere, by biological or chemical weapons" (Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India 2003). Pakistan has a policy of "Full Spectrum Deterrence", designed to deter any

aggression by the threat of nuclear first use. For Pakistan, nuclear weapons are not only a deterrent against nuclear threats or attacks, but also a deterrent against conventional military threats or attacks from India. Thus, it's possible that some kind of traditional conflict may escalate into nuclear conflict. In recent years, there have been heated debates in India about revising the nuclear doctrine to suit the changing environment (Rajagopalan 2016; Dalton 2019). These debates or harsh remarks by Indian senior officials will further increase Pakistan's security concerns, forcing the latter to develop more advanced tactical nuclear weapons and deploy missile systems close to the front. Moreover, India's pursuit of a survivable nuclear triad may also extend the India–Pakistan nuclear deterrence interaction to the Indian Ocean region and destabilize nuclear deterrence.

Recommendations

First, all concerned parties should strive to achieve strategic trust and reach consensus to maintain regional strategic stability. Military is the extension of the politics and one state's security concern stems mainly from the "threat perception" instead of "power balance". The United States is concerned about the development of nuclear weapons in Iran and DPRK, while it is not afraid of Britain's nuclear arsenal. And, since all concerned parties try to maintain second strike capability, it's quite difficult to have actual data about the numbers and the locations of nuclear warheads. Thus, besides talking about the arms race in the region, it's even more important to increase strategic trust among concerned parties.

The United States, as the global leading power, should take responsibility for not damaging South Asian regional security and stability. While pushing forward the out-competing policy towards China, the United States should keep in mind that it's in both countries interest to adhere to non-proliferation and maintain the strategic stability in South Asia. Thus, the United States should avoid providing advanced nuclear weapon technology, including nuclear submarine technology, to India. Otherwise, it may lead to a nuclear arms race in the region and will backfire on the United States in the end. The United States should encourage Pakistan to implement its latest National Security Policy and convince India to respond positively. By taking a more balanced policy between India and Pakistan, the United States could avoid pushing Pakistan into disadvantaged status. Moreover, the United States should not incite bloc politics by sowing discords between China and India, or even between China and Pakistan.

China should adhere to its nuclear doctrine and promote the implementation of the global security initiative in South Asia. The major task at present is to promote the China-India bilateral relationship back to track as soon as possible. China needs to view India from the perspective of building a new type of international relations and a community with a shared future, objectively view the reality and trend of India's rising international status, and acknowledge and support India's larger role in global affairs. India also needs to break out of the competitive cognitive framework of geopolitics, not to draw ideological lines or take sides with a zero-sum mindset, and objectively view the extension of China's national interests and influence.

Though it's quite difficult for India and Pakistan to change their security perception towards each other, it's extremely necessary for both countries to change their mindset

from "absolute security" to "maximum security".[4] Chronic confrontation has inhibited the development potential not only for India and Pakistan, but also for the South Asian regional integration. Now, Pakistan has published the National Security Policy, proposing the comprehensive national security framework and emphasizing the transformation from geo-politics to geo-economics. India should respond to it positively. Both countries should take a "look-forward" attitude towards the dialogue, shelving the disputes while moving forward with feasible cooperation. Communication itself may contribute to the easing of tensions.

Second, all concerned parties should strengthen confidence-building mechanisms and talk seriously about regional strategic stability. This kind of confidence-building mechanism should start at a bilateral level and gradually evolve into a multilateral level. The United States could make use of its special relationship with both India and Pakistan to broker nuclear negotiations between them. The United States should play the role of impartial broker, though it may not be so easy. With the permission of India and Pakistan, the United States could also provide some finance and technical support for both countries to safeguard their nuclear arsenal.

China and India should acknowledge the expanding competition between them and gradually transit the interaction model from "crisis management" to "competition management". The scope of the collision of interests between the two countries is extending. India's strategic misgivings about China began with the border dispute, but have expanded to maritime security, connectivity rules, Indo-Pacific order, cyber security, space weapons and many other areas. It is necessary, therefore, for China and India to shift from a "dispute management mechanism" to a "competition management mechanism" and prevent competition from escalating into confrontation or conflict by communicating with each other on issues that will lead to bilateral competition. For example, China and India should strengthen communication on arms control and non-proliferation, weapons of mass destruction and nuclear transparency.

India and Pakistan should restart their composite dialogue and immediately move forward their peace process. India and Pakistan could add new topics to their composite dialogue, such as the Afghanistan issue and Indo-Pacific strategy. Confidence Building Measures (CBMs) on conventional military activities are also necessary to prevent the confrontation escalating to a nuclear level, since India's conventional military superiority contributes to Pakistan's pursuit of tactical nuclear weapons. Thus, both countries should reduce the military deployment level along the borderline and should agree not to take preemptive military operations, which would send wrong signals and have serious impact. India and Pakistan accuse each other of conducting proxy-war, thus it's urgent for them to have back-door but serious talks on this issue, bringing peace and prosperity to the public while not being hijacked by nationalist remarks.

Third, all concerned parties should take bottom-line thinking and seriously address crisis management. On the one hand, all concerned parties should stick to the existing confidence-building measures and crisis-management commitments seriously. For example, India and Pakistan should fulfill the 1988 Agreement on the Prohibition of

[4]If one country pursued "absolute security", it may neglect the others' security concerns. Thus, this will lead to security dilemma and arms race. If one country pursued "maximum security", it may understand the "limit" of its own security interests and take considerations of the others' security concerns. Thus, the relevant parties may reach compromise..

Attack against Nuclear Installations and Facilities. And politicians should avoid sending wrong signals by talking about the change of nuclear doctrine. On the other hand, concerned parties should seriously address emerging challenges. For example, with the rapid development of advanced technology and cross-domain threats, any serious discussions on nuclear deterrence should include issues like cross-domain deterrence (cyber, maritime) and the latest developed launch weapon systems.

Conclusion

Due to the above-mentioned geopolitical entanglements and the fact that all three countries have nuclear weapons, China, India and Pakistan should pay careful attention to the nuclear trilemma among them. China has pledged to "no first use" of nuclear weapons at any time and under any circumstances, and unconditionally no use of or threat to use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear-weapon states or nuclear-weapon-free zones. Chinese commitment is stable, consistent and responsible. India also adopts the "no first use" principle, though claims to retaliate with nuclear weapons in the event of a major attack against India, or Indian forces anywhere, by biological or chemical weapons. Thus, as long as the decision-making process and chain-of-command are sound, there will be no nuclear conflict between China and India. And considering the harsh natural environment along the border area, and the political unwillingness for both countries to rush into major conflict, it's unimaginable to have large-scale conventional war between them, too. Pakistan takes the full-spectrum deterrence policy to achieve strategic stability towards India. Limited conventional conflict cannot be ruled out between India and Pakistan, but it's quite unlikely that the conflict will escalate to full-scale war under the background of nuclear weapons. The international community, including China, the European Union and the United States, will also try their best to avoid any scenarios of the use of nuclear weapons.

The United States, as an extra-regional nuclear power, is expected to avoid the nuclear situation out of control, though its regional strategy aggravates the geopolitical competition. After the United States adopted the whole-of-government competitive policy towards China, India is emboldened to take a more assertive policy towards China and Pakistan. Pakistan has to increase its nuclear deterrent capability to hedge the disadvantage at the conventional level and achieve strategic stability with India. India is suspicious about China-Pakistan nuclear cooperation. Eyeing the two frontlines, India is trying to develop triad nuclear deterrent capabilities. India's actions will aggravate Pakistan's security concerns, forcing the latter to develop more operational tactical nuclear deterrent capability. It will meet no one's interest to have United States-India versus China-Pakistan competition, but this scenario can't be totally ruled out. Considering that the overall population of China, India and Pakistan are over three billion, any kinds of the use of nuclear weapons will be a catastrophe, not only for the concerned parties but also for the entire world.

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