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Introduction: China–India–Pakistan Nuclear Trilemma and the Imperative of Risk Reduction Measures

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ABSTRACT

Geopolitical tensions in Southern Asia are characterized by shared borders, major territorial disputes, history of wars, political volatility and instability. This fraught dynamic is compounded by China–India–Pakistan nuclear relations or the nuclear “trilemma” which is shaped by military developments, threat perceptions, as well as alliance, adversary and deterrence relations between the three nuclear-armed states. To mitigate the growing risks in Southern Asia and the impact across the Asia-Pacific, the Asia-Pacific Leadership Network for Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament and the Toda Peace Institute have collaborated on a research project to map the contours of the China–India–Pakistan nuclear trilemma. The series of articles published in this special issue of the *Journal for Peace and Nuclear Disarmament* is a selection of nine papers commissioned for the project that address different aspects of the trilemma, examining bilateral, tri-lateral and plurilateral drivers; exploring practical nuclear risk reduction, crisis stability and confidence building measures and a potential nuclear restraint regime; and identify mechanisms and opportunities for tension reduction and conflict resolution in order to normalize interstate relations and promote people-people ties.

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The myth that nuclear weapons have kept the peace among the great powers since 1945 has been challenged on several occasions. Indeed, today the world is infinitely more dangerous with the possession of nuclear weapons by nine countries than would be the case if nuclear abolition had been achieved. On 7 October 2022, US President Joe Biden warned that if Russia uses a tactical nuclear weapon in Ukraine, the world could face “Armageddon” (Williams 2022). The risk of a nuclear war is the highest since the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962, whose 60th anniversary coincided with the latest round of nuclear sabre rattling. On October 23, Russia’s Defense Minister Sergei Shogoi warned of a Ukrainian plot for a false flag operation to detonate a “dirty bomb” (radioactive material wrapped around conventional explosives) and blame it on Moscow as a pretext to escalate the war (Al Jazeera 2022). Then, on October 27, speaking at the annual Valdai Forum, President Vladimir Putin warned that the world faces “probably the most dangerous decade” since the Second World War (Lukov 2022).

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All three warnings are examples of how the Ukraine war has brought about a normalization of the threat of use of nuclear weapons. Thus, Russia's invasion of Ukraine has already reshaped the global discourse on nuclear weapons over the utility and limits of nuclear weapons as a deterrent and as tools of coercive diplomacy, the wisdom of having given them up (Pifer 2022), the incentives to either acquire them or shelter under others' nuclear umbrella and, above all, the cataclysmic risks of an all-out nuclear war that no one wants, but everyone dreads. The existence of 11,405 nuclear weapons in Russian (5,977) and US (5,428) arsenals (90% of world totals) (Federation of American Scientists 2022), far from helping to stabilize the crisis and to calm the tensions, has added to the dangers and threats of the Ukraine war with respect both to nuclear proliferation and nuclear-weapon use.

Indeed, the ongoing conflict in Ukraine poses at least four nuclear dangers. First, the danger of escalation to nuclear use either through deliberate action, or misunderstanding, or by accident. Second, the danger of the continuing reversal of disarmament commitments. Third, the increased prospect of proliferation, especially by non-nuclear weapon states threatened by nuclear-armed states. Finally, the dangerous precedent created by the seizure and attacks on nuclear power plants and its implications for future conflicts.

The de facto proxy war between the North Atlantic Treaty Alliance (NATO) and Russia, in Ukraine, has been waged in the year in which two critical international conferences took place. In June 2022, the inaugural meeting of the States Parties of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) was held in Vienna. The TPNW converted a long-standing political aspiration for a world free of the existence and threat of nuclear weapons into a legal framework for nuclear disarmament. But its legal obligations do not extend to non-signatories and so, the normative force notwithstanding, its practical implications are somewhat limited. However, the TPNW, most of whose members are non-nuclear weapon states from the global South, has reinforced the various regional nuclear weapon-free zones; together they have rendered the entire southern hemisphere free of nuclear weapons. This was followed by the much-postponed 50th anniversary Review Conference of the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT) in New York in August 2022. Unfortunately, this failed to agree on a final document owing to Russia's objection to wording referring to its military actions in Ukraine near nuclear reactors and the Zaporizhzhya nuclear power plant in particular.

In Asia and the Pacific, the bigger limitation of the NPT as one of the two global normative frameworks is that its legal obligations in turn do not apply to at least two and possibly three of Asia's four possessor states. China is the only Asian nuclear-weapon state (NWS) under the NPT. India and Pakistan never signed it and have always opposed it and are consequently free of any legal obligations under the NPT. North Korea used to be a non-NWS State Party but withdrew early in this century and has since conducted several nuclear and missile tests and is believed to have acquired a modest arsenal of nuclear warheads along with short range, medium range and intercontinental ballistic missile delivery systems. Although its legal status with respect to the NPT remains disputed, in practice it has defected from the global nonproliferation regime.

There is no extant over-arching security architecture to regulate and moderate interstate relations across Asia and the Pacific and act as shock absorbers and crisis stabilisers.

This matters, for the possibility of a nuclear war, either by design or, more likely, by accident through human or system error, is small but real. To take but one example, unlike the role of nuclear-armed submarines as strategic stabilizers in the US–Russia equation, in Asia the race to attain continuous at-sea deterrence capability through nuclear-armed submarines is potentially quite destabilizing. The Asian powers lack well-developed operational concepts, robust and redundant command-and-control systems and secure communications over submarines at sea. State-sponsored cross-border militancy and extremism involving nuclear-armed states is another local reality, as is the fear of nuclear terrorism. Unlike the Cold War practice of strategic nuclear policy dialogues firstly among the United States and its allies, and secondly between the US allies and the Soviet Union, no equivalent dialogues exist in Asia and the Pacific either among allies or between adversaries. While there have been some episodic dialogues between India and Pakistan they have not been sustained. Besides, no such dialogue has occurred between China and India.

The geostrategic environment of Southern Asia had no parallel in the Cold War, with shared borders, major territorial disputes, history of many wars since 1947, compressed timeframes for using or losing nuclear weapons, and political volatility and instability. The subcontinental rivalry is not free of the risk of a nuclear exchange triggered by acts of terror committed on Indian territory by individuals and groups linked to networks across the border in Pakistan. Moreover, each party will feel more insecure with every increase in the other's nuclear weapons stockpiles and capabilities. China does not view India as a significant military threat (Dalton and Zhao 2020), is dismissive of India's great power pretensions, holds India's (and Pakistan's) possession of nuclear weapons to be illegitimate and argues the programme should be rolled back because it was done outside the NPT, and expects the military-nuclear power gap between them to grow rather than narrow.

Even a limited regional nuclear war between India and Pakistan involving the use of 100 Hiroshima-size (15kt) bombs in total could cause a global famine through nuclear winter effects that destroy crop production, disrupt global food distribution networks and over a decade kill up to two billion people (International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War 2022). Premeditated nuclear strikes are unlikely pathways to a nuclear exchange between any two or all three of China–India–Pakistan. But the toxic cocktail of growing nuclear stockpiles, expanding weapon platforms (both nuclear and advanced conventional), irredentist territorial claims, out of control jihadist groups, and intimate cross-conflict linkages makes the China–India–Pakistan nuclear chain a high-risk and high-impact geopolitical equation.

Three high-profile events in the last few years have sounded ominous warnings. First, in mid-2017 China and India faced each other in a tense military confrontation at the tri-junction with Bhutan in the Doklam plateau for well over a month (Thakur 2017). In February 2019, a suicide bomber, allegedly inspired, trained and controlled by state-linked handlers in Pakistan, blew up a paramilitary convoy in Kashmir killing several soldiers. India retaliated by launching strikes deep inside Pakistan proper (that is, beyond Kashmir). Pakistan sent warplanes over Indian airspace and in the resulting dogfight, an Indian fighter plane was shot down and its pilot captured but swiftly returned. This was the first instance in the world where two nuclear-armed states had engaged in air strikes and aerial dogfights (Thakur 2019). Third, in June 2020, Chinese and Indian military

forces engaged in hand-to-hand combat in Galwan, high in the Ladakh mountains near the strategic tri-junction of China, India and Pakistan (Thakur 2020). Around 20 Indian and an unknown number of Chinese soldiers were killed. Simultaneously India experienced cyber-attacks, reportedly emanating from China, on critical infrastructure. The 2020 China–India conflict was the biggest loss of military life resulting from a direct clash between two nuclear-armed states since the Amur-Ussuri clashes between the former Soviet Union and China in 1969. It was also the deadliest clash between China and India since their 1962 war and there is no evidence that the Galwan crisis has been defused (Singh 2022). Indeed, there are indications that both sides are digging in for the long haul.

Geopolitical tensions in Asia are thus characterized by a multiplicity of nuclear powers with criss-crossing ties of cooperation and conflict, the fragility of command-and-control systems, threat perceptions between three or more nuclear-armed states simultaneously and a more complex array of deterrence relations between regional and global nuclear-armed states. Asia's strategic environment includes major asymmetries and the role of nuclear weapons in the overall security calculus has been changing. In addition, new technologies such as cyberwarfare, space-based dual use systems and autonomous weapons systems using artificial intelligence are introducing fresh instabilities as are the roles of “grey-zone” operations and those of non-state actors. All this is a challenge for arms control negotiators: simple, number-counting warhead reductions no longer work because it is necessary to look at the wider calculus of security imbalances. Clearly the region suffers from trust deficits in key relations. Its actors have little experience with confidence building measures, lack the machinery which might support such measures and suffer from a lack of official and non-official, so called “Track 2”, processes to act as idea generators.

While politics remains at the core of a solution to both border disputes, growing nuclear arsenals including tactical weapons demand action to create buffers against inadvertent use of nuclear weapons based on miscalculation, faulty information or accidental launch. Accordingly, however desirable it might be as a goal and however compelling the logic in its favour, nuclear disarmament remains an over-the-horizon prospect. In the meantime, there is an urgent need to institute additional safeguards against the intensified risks of accidental, unauthorized or threshold-crossing armed skirmishes tipping Asia and the world into the launch of nuclear weapons. In turn, the institutionalization of these arrangements and practices in a nuclear restraint regime underpinning China–India–Pakistan relations could help to consolidate both crisis and arms race stability measures at the global level.

The Asia-Pacific Leadership Network for Nuclear Non Proliferation and Disarmament (APLN) and the Toda Peace Institute have thus collaborated in a project to identify the key bilateral, trilateral and plurilateral drivers of the China–India–Pakistan nuclear trilemma; map the contours of the triangular nuclear chain; explore practical nuclear risk reduction, crisis stability and confidence building measures, as well as a nuclear restraint regime that covers all three countries; and to identify mechanisms and opportunities for tension reduction and conflict resolution in order to normalize interstate relations and promote people-people ties. The project, led by Shatabhisha Shetty from APLN, WPS Sidhu from New York University's Center for Global Affairs, and Ramesh Thakur from the Toda Peace Institute, commissioned papers from a range of

international experts, mostly but not exclusively from the three countries concerned. A webinar was convened in February 2022 for an online discussion and a hybrid conference was held in Nepal in November 2022 to bring the project's experts together in person to discuss their analysis further.

The present series of articles published in this special issue of the *Journal for Peace and Nuclear Disarmament* is a selection of those papers and addresses different aspects of the China–India–Pakistan trilemma.

The papers showcase the risks of current relations but also the differences in perspective and analysis. The authors examine the nexus between domestic politics and international relations, probing the logic and politics of antagonistic collaboration in maintaining strategic stability through accords, understandings, postures, doctrines, and deployments. They assess commonalities, similarities and differences including demographic, economic, military, as well as implications of the introduction of new technologies and changes to nuclear stockpiles, weapon types and delivery systems for potential risk reduction steps and limitations. They also assess the role of international actors and alliance relationships.

Specifically, **Manpreet Sethi** explores the character of Pakistan–India and China–India nuclear dyads along three axes: drivers of conflict; points of commonalities, nuclear similarities and differences; and implications for nuclear stockpiles. She discusses unresolved territorial issues, terrorism, the perceptions of relations with third countries, and perceptions of intent. She examines the varied role of nuclear weapons between the three countries, assessing how differences in deterrence strategies result in a preference for different nuclear weapons types and delivery systems; differences in nuclear command-and-control systems; and the evolution and introduction of new technologies. She argues that the shared tendency to see nuclear risks as conducive to deterrence means there is no shared desire to maintain strategic stability or agree on the level risks. She offers several policy recommendations including initiating bilateral or multilateral strategic dialogues; formalizing low alert levels; conducting studies on deterrence breakdown; and raising awareness of the dangers of nuclear weapons use among the public.

Feroz Hassan Khan assesses the prospects of strategic risk reduction between China, India and Pakistan by examining the drivers of conflict and strategic risks between the three countries. He discusses strategic force postures and the impact of disruptive technologies. He concludes that strategic risks are compounding due to the combination of dismissive attitudes of a weaker adversary's concerns which increases the propensity of military crises within the dyads; the growth of military and strategic arsenals muddling perceptions of intentions and capabilities and encouraging arms racing; and the introduction of disruptive technologies into the mix of military modernizations in all three countries. He identifies three major strategic risks. First, faulty assessments of intentions and capabilities could lead to dangerous actions and responses. Second, nuclear conventional entanglement of delivery systems increases the chances of blundering into accidental wars. Third, the fusion of precision missile systems with emergent technologies provides multiple pathways to greater risks during an evolving crisis. Khan recommends that the three states should consider new strategic risk-reduction measures through a series of multilateral and bilateral strategic dialogues at the Track-1 and Track-2 levels and offers a model memorandum of understanding between India and Pakistan for consideration by policymakers.

Toby Dalton assesses the deterrence dynamics and calculations within each dyad, considers the trendlines pushing the region towards deterrence multipolarity, and identifies developments that would tip the region from the status quo into a new system. He points out that despite the profound changes underway, nuclear dynamics could continue to be a feature mainly in the India–Pakistan dyad rather than central to a multipolar nuclear deterrence system. He argues that the key variable in an emergent Southern Asian nuclear multipolarity is the India–China relationship and the extent to which nuclear weapons become more prominent in respective national security belief systems in New Delhi and Beijing. In these countries, nuclear posture changes that create nuclear coupling and hardening of geopolitical alignments into more adversarial blocs could shift the current status-quo balance. To build greater predictability, improve stability and reduce potential sources of conflict in the region, he recommends that China, India and Pakistan could usefully develop new measures to manage common-pool resource competition, dangerous behaviours in space, as well as range of crises and emergencies.

Jingdong Yuan examines internal dynamics and how domestic drivers, such as rising nationalism, public opinion, civil–military relations, and command-and-control structures provide incentives and constraints on nuclear policies, mitigating or exacerbating risks. He looks at causes of instability, risks of conflict and escalation to nuclear use, as well as prospects of restraint and risk reduction. He argues that the China–India–Pakistan triangle cannot be properly examined without also evaluating the role of the United States in an emerging great-power competition for influence and primacy in the Indian Ocean. He recommends that China and India reaffirm their no first use policies, resume the high-level bilateral security dialogue along with the regular Army Corps-level meetings, and India and Pakistan to reaffirm and continue to refrain from attacking each other’s nuclear facilities.

Lou Chunhao examines the lack of strategic trust in relations between China, India and Pakistan. He highlights that the range of interest areas between India and China expanding along with the areas of mutual competition and limited conflict. He argues that India’s strategic misgivings about China began with the border dispute but have expanded to economic issues, maritime security, connectivity, cyber security, space weapons and the Indo-Pacific order. Although China does not wish to be involved in the India–Pakistan confrontation, the China factor will nonetheless shape India–Pakistan interactions. He acknowledges that the US–China strategic competition will also impact relations in the triangle despite China’s stance against bloc politics competition. Lou identifies concerns that India is becoming part of the US containment strategy against China, forsaking its non-alignment policy and further complicating nuclear dynamics. He offers three future identities for China and India: first where China and India, as two emerging powers, should adopt independent foreign policies and not align against third countries; second where India and China’s outlook emphasizes harmony not competition or conflict; and third, China and India should provide more global public goods and contribute further to global governance. He also argues that to prevent escalation into confrontation it is necessary for China and India to shift from dispute management to competition management.

Sadia Tasleem explores the notions of national identity and interest formation in the nexus between domestic politics and bilateral relations within the three dyads. She identifies the most important domestic political drivers of bilateral relations and what

current trendlines reveal for the future. Given the variation in domestic political structures and decision-making processes across the three states, she argues that no single theory offers a suitable framework of analysis but that the policies of India and Pakistan vis-à-vis each other are intrinsically linked to the domestic political imperatives given that both sides occupy a considerably important place in each other's popular political imagination and national identity conception. She argues that China's bilateral relations with India and Pakistan, in so far as domestic political imperatives are concerned, are mainly driven by the decision-making elite and centered around internal stability, and economic growth. Elite-driven policy is the most critical factor in Pakistan and China relations vis-à-vis the other and with India. In comparison, India's relations with Pakistan and China are increasingly defined by the ruling party's conception of national identity making India's foreign policy more susceptible to the pressures of electoral outcomes.

Rakesh Sood argues that notions of parity and mutual vulnerability that informed ideas of strategic stability during the Cold War are being questioned in an era marked by multiple flashpoints in several nuclear dyads, of which some are coupled into chains, with some linkages tighter than others. Adding to the uncertainty is the asymmetry of nuclear arsenals and doctrines, technological developments and changing threat perceptions. In examining the challenges of the new nuclear age in terms of multiple dyads and triangular relationships, Sood stresses that potential flashpoints between nuclear weapon states are no longer issues on the peripheries of spheres of influence but have now assumed centrality as sovereignty-related issues. For China, it is Taiwan and South China Seas, and now also eastern Ladakh and Arunachal Pradesh that China claims as south Tibet, and for India and Pakistan it has been Kashmir. He assesses future possibilities for dialogue to manage nuclear risks, bilaterally, trilaterally and in a broader setting and stresses that new proposals must account for new political realities. He argues that high-level political commitment is needed for sustained dialogue and for keeping channels of communication open.

Salman Bashir makes the case that the Asia-Pacific is the new locus of global power politics with India joining the United States in shaping a geopolitical response to China's geoeconomic outreach. He identifies the strategic priorities of India, Pakistan and China, the major elements of each dyad's bilateral relations, the role of each country within the region, and the regional implications of alliances and great power competition. He argues that the Indo-US defence partnership has led to a worsening of India-China relations, disturbing the tenuous strategic balance between Pakistan and India. He points out that a maritime dimension adds further complexity and responsibly managing competition is necessary. Bashir argues that a nuclear conflict between China and India is unlikely, and their border disputes are amenable to peaceful resolution with political will. Pakistan's new geoeconomic paradigm could also forge a path towards inter-regional cooperation with India.

Prakash Menon argues that the China-India-Pakistan nuclear trilemma is shaped by forces from the global nuclear environment and therefore must be addressed as part of the larger global nuclear weapons dilemma which is rooted in a firm belief of the utility of nuclear weapons. Using the Clausewitz escalation model, he argues that the greatest danger of nuclear war in the India-Pakistan and China-India dyads is in the inability to control the escalation of conflicts that may have small beginnings but could potentially

spin out of control. An acceptance that territorial claims should not be settled by use of force should inform strategic relations between the three countries. He recommends greater awareness of the dangers of nuclear war and the consideration and promotion of a global No First Use Treaty.

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