

Dynamics of South Asian Strategic Stability and Prospects for Regional Stability

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Introduction

During the Cold War the security and stability of South Asia revolved around India-Pakistan hostile relationship, Sino-Indian relations, and South Asian nuclear proliferation issues. But the events of 9/11 have substantially transformed the security landscape of South Asia. Post 9/11 security situation is much different as terrorism has added a new and potent factor affecting the stability of this region. Moreover, presence of external powers and their increasing influence in shaping regional security environment has made the security situation more complex.¹

Traditionally India and Pakistan have had a tense relationship owing to unresolved Kashmir dispute, but in the post-9/11 period India's increasing conventional military strength, as well as the strengthening of Indo-US ties, coupled with India's deepening interest in Afghanistan and the Karzai government's growing trust with India have multiplied the external threats for Pakistan.² These developments have complicated existing relationship between India and Pakistan. Pakistan is now faced with low intensity conflict on its western border, and conventional Indian threat on its eastern border. Besides, its internal situation is directly influenced by external security pressures.

The issue of rising militancy due to Pakistan's porous borders with Afghanistan, and increasing external interference inside Pakistan has badly impacted the internal dynamics of the state-society structure in Pakistan as well as Afghanistan. US offensive strategy (Af-Pak), and escalation in US drone attacks inside Pakistan's territory, causing collateral damage has increased anti-American and anti-government sentiments, which is also rampant violation of the country's territorial sovereignty.³ At the same time, India- China rivalry and India's threat perception regarding the Chinese expansion in the Indian Ocean and its strengthening strategic ties with Pakistan are additional factors in regional security dynamics.

This paper provides an overview of changing dynamics of regional security and examines challenges emanating from these developments to strategic stability of South Asia.

India-Pakistan dynamic Relationship

India and Pakistan went overtly nuclear in 1998. Even after so many years of existence of nuclear weapons in the region there is a general perception that the region lacks nuclear stability. Unlike other regions South Asian nuclear situation is dynamic for the reason that deterrence in the region has not yet stabilized.⁴ There is also no likelihood of its stabilization in the near future for a variety of reasons. One of the main causes of this unstable relationship is the unresolved disputes between the two states. Disputes pertain to Kashmir, border demarcation, and water distribution. These are summarized here.

- Kashmir which is the major issue between the two neighbouring countries has been on the agenda of UN Security Council since 1948 but has remained unresolved.
- Siachen is another important issue. The problem arose because there is no agreed demarcation on area called Siachen. In 1948 proposed agreement it was decided that straight line should be drawn to mark the areas that belong to India and Pakistan, North to Pakistan and South to India. Agreement was reached for formalization of this position but Indians went back on their commitments. As a draft agreement on this issue already exists it is comparatively easy to resolve but India does not seem interested in the resolution of the problem.
- Distribution of river waters is also an issue of vital importance in South Asia. The dispute is primarily between the upper (India) and lower (Pakistan) riparian. According to the terms of Indus Water Treaty Pakistan was given exclusive rights on waters of Western rivers i.e. Indus, Jehlum and Chenab. Despite the settlement of the issue by the Treaty tension between India and Pakistan has remained as India is accused by Pakistan of building dams on rivers, in violation of the Treaty, on which Pakistan has exclusive rights.⁵
- Sir Creek is comparatively a small dispute, and relates to the demarcation of boundary in Rann of Kutch area but has remained unresolved.

Apart from active conventional wars, the entire history of India-Pak relations is marred by crises. Before moving to explain dynamics of strategic stability it is important to highlight some of the crisis situations when armed conflict appeared imminent in the period prior to India-Pakistan nuclearization. A crisis developed in 1986-87 when India conducted extensive military exercises 'Brasstacks' only 20 miles from the Pakistan border.⁶ "In 1990, following an upsurge in violence in disputed territory of Jammu and Kashmir and subsequent Indian allegations of Pakistani support to the insurgents resulted in heightened tensions. A crisis again developed as Pakistan conducted 'Zarb-e-Momin',"⁷ a major military exercise that India responded to by its own "precautionary" reinforcements on the borders with Pakistan. The May, 1998 nuclear tests by India and Pakistan led to fundamental changes in the dynamics of stability in the region. The nuclear explosions ended more than a decade-long period of covert nuclearization during which two sides had exercised "existential deterrence."⁸

Overt nuclearization created a new security situation. Nuclear weapons since then have become an additional factor in regional politics, and resultant emergence of strategic deterrence between India and Pakistan is presently the fundamental pillar of security in South Asia. This deterrence relationship has, thus far, fulfilled its basic theoretical function i.e. prevention of a full scale conventional war between the two nuclear weapon states, which is likely to remain so in the foreseeable future. Nuclear deterrence however, remained unsuccessful in preventing either state from military adventures. In wake of 1998 nuclear tests India and Pakistan signed Lahore Declaration to normalize their relations but before any substantive initiative could be taken both states were soon embroiled in another series of crises.⁹

- The Kargil conflict in May 1999 was the first major instance of military hostilities between India and Pakistan after both states had become declared nuclear weapon powers. Soon after Kargil, large scale Indian military mobilization once again brought South Asia to the brink of war.
- In 2001-2002, again both states were in direct confrontation in wake of Indian allegation that an attack on the Indian Parliament, in December 2001, was sponsored by Pakistan. India then mobilized its forces and moved them on borders with Pakistan, and Pakistan responded in kind.

The confrontation of 2001-2002 was eventually resolved and composite dialogue process between the two countries began in 2004. The dialogue process however,

did not produce tangible results despite its continuation for several years. After the Mumbai terror attacks of November 26, 2008 the relations between the two neighbors again sharply deteriorated and the dialogue process was suspended, which could not be resumed even after a lapse of five years.

Increasing Distrust-Changing Perceptions

Interplay of strategic culture and nuclear doctrines of India and Pakistan defines the threat perceptions of each country. Threat perceptions, of both India and Pakistan have a significant impact on strategic stability in South Asia.¹⁰ Their historical experience is the chief promoter of mistrust between the two neighbors, which in turn makes the two sides suspicious as well as fearful of each other's intentions, leading to an urge to do more to secure themselves.¹¹ Respective histories of India and Pakistan are a compilation of perceived injustices, accusations, bloody wars, unending tensions and protracted conflicts. Pakistan does not accept Indian supremacy, and India has grave grievances on the partition of subcontinent and creation of Pakistan, which is sometimes referred to as vivisection of Mother India.¹² This phenomenon is further complicated due to experiences of wars and conflicts over unresolved disputes, primarily on Kashmir. Mistrust is a logical outcome of these actual or psychological experiences.

The existing nuclear doctrines of India and Pakistan add to ambiguity rather than reinforcing element of certainty about the purpose and use of nuclear weapons by these states. According to India's draft nuclear doctrine of 1999 "The fundamental purpose of nuclear weapons is to deter the use and threat of use of nuclear weapons by any state or entity against India and its forces, but will respond with punitive retaliation should deterrence fail."¹³ Pakistan has not made its nuclear doctrine public so far. It has, however, affirmed on many occasions that it follows minimum credible deterrence as the guiding principle of its nuclear policy. Unlike India, Pakistan maintains a first use nuclear policy, but with the provision that its nuclear weapons will be used as a last resort under circumstances which threaten its survival.¹⁴

Analysis of these statements shows that, both India and Pakistan have ambiguous and unclear nuclear doctrines. Pakistan has stated that its first use of nuclear weapons will come as a last resort but has understandably not listed specific actions and conditions under which this last resort would come under consideration.¹⁵ Pakistan's nuclear policy only mentions unacceptable damage in

economic, military, spatial and domestic areas in general terms with regard to its nuclear threshold. India's doctrine on the other hand, professes no-first use of nuclear weapons, has given conditions under which this doctrine might not be followed. Therefore, in effect no guarantee of no-first use from India in a conflict situation exists. Apart from what these doctrines say, the two sides, being rational actors have complete realization of the fact that a peacetime policy statement may widely differ from how the states actually act when facing a crisis.

Indian Proactive Strategy and Pakistan's Strategic Response

Frustrated with the stalemate created by the 2001-2002 military confrontation, Indian military strategists developed Cold Start Doctrine. By adopting this new proactive strategy India had hoped to create a situation wherein with advantage of its greater conventional forces, it will be in a position to force a result in its favor. It was in effect looking for exploring the possibility of a limited war in a nuclearized environment.¹⁶ Pakistan maintains a posture of adequate conventional defense and minimum credible deterrence that suggests an integrated interface between conventional military and nuclear forces. Its force posture compensates for its conventional military asymmetry with nuclear deterrent capability. Some analysts have pointed out that asymmetry in conventional forces of India and Pakistan may result in lowering the nuclear threshold in South Asia in a crisis situation.

From a Pakistani perspective, the state of conventional military asymmetry between India and Pakistan is inversely proportional to the nuclear threshold for the employment of nuclear weapons: higher the asymmetries, lower the nuclear threshold, and lower the asymmetries, higher the nuclear threshold.¹⁷

In this regard Pakistan has altered its nuclear strategy from credible minimum deterrence to full spectrum deterrence. In a recent NCA meeting presided over by Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif Director SPD, General Khalid Kidwai said, "Pakistan would not remain oblivious to evolving security dynamics in South Asia and would maintain a full spectrum deterrence capability to deter all forms of aggression."¹⁸ It is also very clear that this policy is only to counter Indian proactive strategy and conventional military threat.

India and Pakistan's growing nuclear arsenals

India and Pakistan both are reportedly increasing and modernizing their arsenals of nuclear weapons at fast pace. According to SIPRI both nations are developing an array of new warheads of different yields and more importantly they are developing tactical nuclear weapons.¹⁹

India recently announced changes in its nuclear posture. The evolving Indian doctrine postulates that India will respond to a tactical nuclear weapon strike in the same manner as it would respond to a strategic nuclear attack. Change in Indian doctrines has the potential to substantively lower the nuclear threshold.

Indian nuclear deterrent is triad in nature which includes modest arsenal, nuclear capable aircraft and missiles. Its land based missiles include both Agni-II (1500) as well as Agni-III (2500 km) missiles. On third layer of triad it needs at least three Arihant class nuclear submarines. India already had tested submarine-based missiles systems have been developed and tested in the form of Sagarika.²⁰

Internal Factors

India and Pakistan both are facing internal security threats where militant insurgencies in different areas of each country are posing threats to internal security. On Indian side militants belonging to Maoist-Naxalite movement are quite active. This movement is a serious source of internal destabilization in India and one of its biggest internal security challenges. Pakistan is facing infiltration of Taliban and Al-Qaida from Afghanistan and internally facing major security threat from insurgents in Balochistan. Pakistan alleges Indian support to the Balochi insurgents. Security of its nuclear weapons is alleged to be inadequate by certain quarters. Fears are also expressed that these weapons may fall into hands of terrorists. In regard to safety and security of nuclear weapons, Pakistan has repeatedly assured that it has taken a number of steps to secure its nuclear facilities and material from falling into wrong hands.

The international community frequently expresses concerns and fears about safety and security of Pakistan's nuclear arsenals but ignores these in regard to India, especially when the internal factors leading to these concerns are more or less similar in the two countries. Areas like Jharkhand and Maharashtra are parts of area which is designated as 'Red Corridor'²¹ by the Indian authorities due to ongoing insurgent movement in these areas and bad law and order conditions.

Many of India's nuclear facilities are located there. These facilities may therefore be vulnerable to insurgents' attacks.

External Factors

Afghanistan Situation and its Impact on Regional Stability

A stable, friendly, and peaceful Afghanistan, in the eyes of Pakistan, is necessary for its own security as well as the enduring stability of South Asia. Unstable Afghanistan will always remain a source of instability in the region and an irritant in the relations between the two countries. Afghanistan situation after 2001 has further complicated the traditional Pakistani threat perception, which was always east focused. Now Pakistan has to focus both on its eastern and western frontiers as the deployment pattern of international forces in Afghanistan close to Pakistani border poses a strategic threat to Pakistan. Recent events such as Abbottabad raid, Salala check post attack, and clash between the armies of Afghanistan and Pakistan over construction of border posts support this assertion. In the post 2014 period, after the drawdown of US forces from Afghanistan Pakistan's worries regarding its security from the west are not likely to be allayed due to reported Indian involvement in Afghanistan. India has reportedly opened a number of consulates in Afghanistan which cannot be justified by the small number of people needing counselor services for visiting India from Afghanistan. It is a source of serious concern for Pakistan. Pakistan also suspects Indian role in fanning insurgency in its Balochistan province bordering Afghanistan.

India-US Strategic Relationship and its Impact on Regional Stability

The new strategic partnership between India and United States was underscored by signing of Indo-US civil nuclear agreement in 2005. This agreement has enabled India to acquire civil nuclear technology from the US and other members of the Nuclear Suppliers Group. Subsequently US efforts to get India NSG waiver for operationalization of the nuclear deal has accorded India a semi *de jure* status of a Nuclear Weapon State. The growing relations between US and India are aimed at enhancing Indian stature in the region and making it a significant global actor. But these efforts have negative implication for the fragile strategic stability in South Asia.²²

The Indo-US civil nuclear agreement and NSG waiver, if implemented, will enable India to increase its fissile stocks and make qualitative and quantitative

improvements in its nuclear weapons. These efforts by India can destabilize the region by triggering an arms competition between India and Pakistan. One of the major reasons why Pakistan is not supporting the negotiations for a Fissile Material Cut-off Treaty (FMCT) is because it believes that India will be able to accumulate huge amounts of fissile material in future due to advantageous position it has been placed in after the Indo-US nuclear treaty.²³

India Pakistan Security Dilemma

Security dilemma also has an impact on strategic stability of the region. Security dilemma between India and Pakistan has existed because one country is bigger and the other is smaller but not so weak that it can accept the other's hegemony. Pakistan as smaller power feels insecure in the wake of Indian ambitious military designs. To counter this threat Pakistan, since its independence, has aligned itself with extra regional powers like US and China for its security. There is consensus in the country that Pakistan would never accept Indian hegemony under any condition. Stephen P. Cohen in his recent book, *Shooting for a Century, Finding Answers to the India-Pakistan Conundrum*, argues that one of the reasons behind unstable relationship between India and Pakistan is the fact that India does not want a strong Pakistan and many Indians would like to see Pakistan become their Canada but instead it is becoming their nuclear Cuba.²⁴ China factor has added complexity to the security situation in South Asia. India perceives Pakistan's strategic ties with China, and Chinese military expansion a major source of strategic instability, and justifies its defense spending on increasing strength in the global context by portraying China as threat to its security.

Pakistan and India have now moved beyond the initial phase of nuclearization and consolidation, and are now entering the phase of strategic contest by qualitative and quantitative improvement of their strategic nuclear forces.²⁵ The fundamental problem created by these challenges is the strain it puts on nuclear stability. Both countries are now engaged in improving the quality of their nuclear weapons and delivery systems. The Nuclear equation between India and Pakistan often gets disturbed, creating instability. India being a bigger power initiates a step like introducing a new missile or making public a new military doctrine (Cold Start) to which the other side responds with some balancing efforts, restoring a delicate balance.

Indian-China Rivalry and its Impact on Regional Stability

The equation between India and Pakistan is further complicated by the China factor in Indian military strategic planning. Indian expansion of land and air forces is viewed as an effort at containment of China with the support and help of US. Moreover, India considers Indian Ocean its exclusive interest zone. India and China both are in the process of developing blue water navies, which may lead to further tension between the two rivals.²⁶

Indian military has recently come up with another military doctrine to counter threat on its eastern border with China. In order to operationalize this new doctrine, Indian army undertook massive reorganization of its military corps under its Long Term Integrated Perspective Plan 2012-2027 (LTIPP). A new “mountain strike corps” would be created under this plan which would allow India to move rapidly to counter possible Chinese incursions into disputed areas.²⁷

Development of this doctrine shows a major reorientation of Indian military strategy from defense to limited offense. LTIPP would allow India to quickly transfer troops and equipment from one mountain war zone to another, making it possible for its military to fight both the adversaries China and Pakistan simultaneously. As a result, any increase in offensive capability along the Chinese border has implications for regional stability.²⁸

India has recently test fired nuclear capable ballistic missiles Agni V (5000 Km range), which will be able to target Chinese cities of Beijing and Shanghai. Both nations are also projecting military assets in the outer-space. India has launched military centric satellite in recent past, while China has tested its Anti -Satellite capabilities.

China insists on resolving territorial disputes with India without moving from its traditional position on Tibet. India perceives Pakistan and China as threat to its national security. US presence in South Asia after Indian strategic alliance has implications for China’s security.²⁹ Chinese are well aware of the US strategy of containment particularly in South China Sea where US military assistance to Taiwan is a cause of Chinese worries. India, Japan and South Korea are already China’s strategic concern. India is also engaged in expanding its naval strength. According to Indian perception China is encircling India from east, through Myanmar coast from Northern Frontiers through Tibet, and from west through

Pakistan. In this regard India's naval modernization and expansion programme envisages building a blue water navy with the capability to operate over 200 miles from the shore.³⁰ This capability will enable the Indian Navy to choke sea lanes whereas, China wants to keep all sea lanes for vital energy supplies from the Persian Gulf. To cope with these challenges Chinese are building People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) with blue water capabilities with special focus on air sea battle capabilities.³¹

Apart from these acquisitions, Indian strategic maneuvering in the Indian Ocean like building ports in Iran and connecting it to Afghanistan indicates that Indian strategy of extending influence is not limited to the Indian Ocean. Afghanistan and Central Asia are also among Indian areas of Interest.

Indian air power, both over land and sea, will extend the influence of Indian Navy beyond Indian territories and pose serious challenges to Pakistan's national security. In order to ensure the maritime security and stability in the Arabian Sea Pakistan will have to carry out strategic appraisal of existing naval power and may take necessary measures to counter the threat from sea in future.

Conclusion

Strategic stability in South Asia has become a complex phenomenon. It is primarily defined by the relations between India and Pakistan. Nuclear factor has added further complexity to the adversarial relationship between the two neighbours.

Historically dispute over Jammu and Kashmir between India and Pakistan, and Indian rivalry with China have been the major security challenges in the region. But nuclear weapons have brought a fundamental change in this relationship. After the acquisition of nuclear weapons by India and Pakistan it was hoped that the region will achieve deterrence stability. But deterrence between the two South Asian rivals has not yet stabilized. Their deterrence is faced with a number of internal and external challenges.

India's growing relations with US particularly Indo-US civil nuclear deal is a main source of concern for Pakistan. The broader framework of Indo-US strategic partnership at the cost of regional instability may also force other smaller states in the region to re-evaluate their security imperatives and look for other options to safeguard their security. They may decide to enhance their conventional force

levels or take measures for strategic realignments. In response to the Indo-US nuclear deal the Pakistani government is seeking more intensive cooperation with China in the military and nuclear fields. Similarly other countries like Bangladesh and Sri Lanka have increased their defense budgets.

The absence of a viable security framework which can address the security sensitivities of India and Pakistan as well as China is a grave challenge to the regional strategic stability. Immediately after nuclear tests by India and Pakistan, Pakistan had offered to India Strategic Restraint Regime (SRR) proposal, with its three interlocking elements of nuclear restraint, conventional force balance and dispute settlement.³² The SRR has remained on the table since then and more recently was re-offered to India in the Nuclear and Conventional CBMs talks which began in 2004. India has constantly rejected Pakistan's proposal. In order to ensure stability of the region the proposal on Restraint Regime need to be taken seriously. Inclusion of China at some subsequent date may also be considered for enduring peace in the South Asian region.

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Endnotes

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