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Challenges of Strategic Stability

Amongst Littoral Powers of the Indian
Ocean Region

Challenges of Strategic Stability Amongst Littoral Powers of the Indian Ocean Region

Zahir Kazmi¹

The Indian Ocean Region holds strategic significance due to its historical and economic importance. However, it faces strategic instability due to increasing great power contestation and disputes between its littoral Nuclear Weapon States, Pakistan and India. Modernization of nuclear and conventional forces, risk-taking military doctrines, and unregulated military applications of emerging technologies are among the sources of this instability. This paper reinterprets the concept of strategic stability and discusses the challenges of maintaining it in the IOR. It highlights the role of India's growing power ambition, the widening gap in nuclear and conventional power asymmetries between Pakistan and India, and the US-led policy to build India as a counterweight to China. It warns that these factors may turn India into a source of insecurity. India's nuclear enterprise, which fuels its global power ambition, is outgrowing its security needs against China and Pakistan. It suggests that the US may need to counteract India's growing capabilities and behavior to

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maintain the post-Second World War rules-based order. Additionally, it warns that if India can play arch-rivals and claim strategic autonomy today, it may work against American interests once its dependence reduces.

Keywords: Indian Ocean Region, Strategic Instability, Great Power Contestation, Nuclear Enterprise, India's Ambition, US Counterbalance Strategy.

Introduction

The Indian Ocean Region (IOR) spans East Africa, the Subcontinent, and Australia, holding immense strategic significance. It has been a theater of human interactions for centuries. European powers vied for control over this lucrative trade route after Vasco da Gama's successful voyage in 1498, establishing the first all-water trade route between Europe and Asia. Today, the region remains economically vital, carrying nearly two-thirds of global oil shipments and a third of bulk cargo. It is also a region of intense geopolitical contestation.² While strategic stability in the IOR faces challenges, concerted efforts by littoral and extra-regional powers can mitigate risks of war and promote peace in this critical region. The IOR is considered strategically unstable³ owing to the increasing great power contestation and long-standing disputes between its littoral Nuclear Weapon States (NWS), Pakistan and India.

Eastern Europe and Asia-Pacific are also not immune to the heightened nuclear risk due to increasing great power competition.⁴ A non-nuclear crisis or a limited conventional war in these regions could escalate to the nuclear level.

2. Netajee Abhinandan, "Changing Security Environment in Indian Ocean: Decoding the Indian Strategy," *Indian Foreign Affairs Journal* 14, no. 2 (June 2019): 137, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48636720>.

3. Gulshan Bibi and Brice Tseen Fu Lee, "Ramifications of India's Naval Build-Up in Nuclear Realms," *Margalla Papers* 27, no. 2 (December 31, 2023): 8, <https://doi.org/10.54690/margallapapers.27.2.171>.

4. Tanweer Shahid, "Strategic Power Play in the Indian Ocean and Pakistan," *NDU Journal* 35 (December 31, 2021): 41, <https://ndujournal.ndu.edu.pk/site/article/view/78>.

Modernization of nuclear and conventional forces and a drift toward risk-taking military doctrines are amongst the sources of strategic instability. Likewise, the unregulated military applications of critical and emerging technologies, or inadvertent and accidental use of weapons systems, can trigger crises that could lead to unwanted war.

As littoral states of IOR, Pakistan and India form the landmass commonly called Indian Subcontinent. This geographical name-tagging does not imply that the Subcontinent and the Ocean belong to India. The Pakistan-India bilateral animus over unresolved disputes, Indian great power ambition, laced with modernization of military capabilities and dynamism in its force posture and doctrines, and the US-led Western policy to build India as a counterweight to China, cast a shadow on the pursuit of strategic stability in the IOR.

This paper offers a reinterpretation of the concept of strategic stability and elaborates on the problematic pursuit of building and maintaining strategic stability in the IOR.

Redefining Strategic Stability

“Strategic stability” is one of the most used yet least understood terms⁵ with multiple non-standard interpretations. Even the US and Russia, who initially developed a common understanding of what it constitutes, have developed differences in its interpretation and manifestation.⁶ In the simplest form, strategic stability is a product of the measures taken to avoid war. Some of the nuclear-armed states are afflicted by the so-called “stability-instability paradox.”⁷ They paradoxically seek space

5. C. Dale Walton and Colin S. Gray, “Chapter 3: The Geopolitics of Strategic Stability: Looking Beyond Cold Warriors and Nuclear Weapons,” in *Strategic Stability: Contending Interpretations*, ed. Elbridge A. Colby and Michael S. Gerson (Pennsylvania: Strategic Studies Institute and US Army War College Press, 2013), 85, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep12086.6>.

6. Sarah Bidgood, “What We Talk About When We Talk About US-Russia Strategic Stability,” *Journal for Peace and Nuclear Disarmament* 6, no. 1 (January 2, 2023): 10, <https://doi.org/10.1080/25751654.2023.2221486>.

7. Mark S. Bell and Nicholas L. Miller, “Questioning the Effect of Nuclear Weapons on Conflict,” *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* 59, no. 1 (February 2015): 76, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24546219>.

for war under a nuclear overhang⁸ while claiming to espouse the principle that “a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought.” The underlying assumption in taking such risk may be that rational actor states would not escalate the war to a level that the adversary resorts to the use of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) – the so-called Samson’s Option.⁹

In 1985, once US President Ronald Reagan and Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev agreed that they must never fight a nuclear war,¹⁰ they could perhaps avoid creating the stability-instability paradox by setting a comprehensive scope of what constitutes strategic stability. If a nuclear war must never be fought, then what? In that condition, deterrence becomes the primary recourse but not the only one. The goal of deterrence and complementary strategies would thus be to discourage aggression by, *inter alia*, maintaining a credible threat of a devastating response to an attack.¹¹

Is there a common ground between the two conflicting paradigms? One is a holistic and ideal situation of no war. Second is the lowest common denominator of tacitly accepting space for limited conflict. States with comprehensive strategic, conventional, economic, information, and political clout prefer to

8. Muhammad Ali and Syed Mussawar Hussain Bukhari, “Indian Military Doctrine and Its Impact on South Asia’s Strategic Stability,” *Margalla Papers* 26, no. I (June 30, 2022): 78, <https://doi.org/10.54690/margallapapers.26.I.98.\uc0\u8221{}\\i{Margalla Papers}> 26, no. I (June 30, 2022)

9. The name is inspired by the biblical figure Samson, who, in the story, pushed apart the pillars of a Philistine temple, causing the roof to collapse and killing himself along with thousands of Philistines who had captured him. Just as Samson’s act was a desperate final stand, Samson’s Option represents the extreme measure a state could take to prevent its own destruction, usually used for Israel’s similar option.

10. Press Releases, “Joint Soviet-United States Statement on the Summit Meeting in Geneva,” Ronald Reagan Archives, November 21, 1985, <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/joint-soviet-united-states-statement-summit-meeting-geneva>.

11. Vergun, David. “DOD Official Outlines US Nuclear Deterrence Strategy.” US Department of Defense, September 2, 2020. <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/2334600/dod-official-outlines-us-nuclear-deterrence-strategy/>.

choose the latter and less-than-ideal situations as strategic stability. Apparently, the multiple means available for influencing and achieving their goals allow such big powers to maintain a higher nuclear threshold. However, the smaller the power and the fewer the options, the lower the declared threshold for nuclear use.

Strategic stability could be seen as a “trinity” with deterrence and arms control as two mutually complementary subordinates to clear the fog of varied perceptions.

The subordinates play a “good cop, bad cop” role in achieving strategic stability. Since the ideal no-war condition seems like a chimera, neorealism suggests that the risk of war should be lowered as a common denominator through other practical means. The end product of both deterrence and arms control theories is the prevention of war, especially nuclear war. The former seeks to achieve it by paradoxically threatening the use of nuclear weapons, and the latter by reaching the same end through peaceful means.



Arms control efforts involve negotiations, agreements, and treaties between states to limit or manage their nuclear arsenals. The “good cop” role is played by diplomats, negotiators, and international organizations, emphasizing cooperation, transparency, and mutual benefits. Arms control aims to reduce the risks associated with nuclear weapons by imposing limits, verification mechanisms, and confidence building measures (CBMs). In that manner, non-proliferation and disarmament measures serve the same ends because one is about keeping the numbers to a minimum, and the other is the ultimate step of giving up the armament, akin to what the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) achieved and the Biological Weapons Convention (BWC) is at-

tempting to verify.

As a “bad cop,” nuclear deterrence relies on the threat of retaliation to prevent adversaries from using nuclear weapons. This bad cop role is played by possessing nuclear arsenals and demonstrating resolve. Deterrence emphasizes strength, unpredictability, and the potential consequences of aggression. It seeks to discourage adversaries from initiating nuclear conflict due to fear of retaliation.

This paradigm would represent the most realistic approach toward pursuing strategic stability, if standardized. This is so because strategic stability is an overarching goal, seeking to ensure that neither party feels compelled to resort to war, especially nuclear war, i.e., first strike or first use. A first strike seeks the complete elimination of an adversary’s retaliatory capabilities, while first use does not guarantee that outcome.

The “good cop” (arms control) seeks to prevent an arms race (which is non-proliferation in essence) and enhance predictability. The “bad cop” (deterrence) maintains a credible deterrence posture to discourage aggression. Arms control and deterrence have a mutually complementing relationship. Too much arms control without deterrence could lead to vulnerability, while excessive deterrence without arms control may escalate tensions and lead to war.

Strategic (In)Stability of Great Powers

The US, Russia, and China relationship significantly affects global security environment and is currently in a rough patch. The bilateral US-Russia arms control mechanisms have gradually eroded, and both are modernizing their militaries, especially their strategic forces. While there is a vast asymmetry in China’s level of strategic armament compared to Russia and the US, the latter has begun taking pre-emptive and anticipatory measures to contain China and engage it in a plurilateral arms control mechanism along with Russia.

The American active support to Taiwan and other politico-economic measures against China have increased the likelihood of their “competitive-cooperative” relationship escalating into an armed one. Most significant is the formation of a ring of nuclear alliances around China that involve India, Australia, Japan, the UK, and other American allies and partners. This transition of great powers renewed the Cold War into a possible Hot War and is increasingly becoming consequential for the IOR, particularly for Pakistan and India. These issues are further elaborated below.

In their 16 June 2021 joint statement on strategic stability, both Russia and America agreed on “reducing the risk of armed conflicts and the threat of nuclear war.”¹² They also reaffirmed the principle mentioned above and together agreed to embark on an “integrated bilateral Strategic Stability Dialogue.”¹³ This statement, besides underscoring the significance of maintaining a mutual deterrent relationship based on strategic balance, also refers to “reducing the risk of armed conflicts,” which is a broader scope of strategic stability. However, the conflict in Ukraine began soon after this statement, which has undermined this common understanding of strategic stability because NATO is supporting Ukraine in a delicate act of remaining below Russian threshold.

The US believes that compared to the Cold War era, the situation has changed due to the return of geopolitics, whereby so-called revisionist powers seek to alter the status quo.¹⁴ Rising powers, so-called rogue nations, and regional rivals are expanding their nuclear arsenals. In the American threat perception, these

12. Statements and Releases, “US-Russia Presidential Joint Statement on Strategic Stability,” *The White House*, June 16, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/06/16/u-s-russia-presidential-joint-statement-on-strategic-stability/>.

13. Statements and Releases.

14. Emma Ashford, “Assumption #1: Revisionist States Are the Cause of Great-Power Competition,” Issue Brief, Assumptions Testing Series (Washington, D.C.: Atlantic Council, February 3, 2021), 3, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/content-series/assumption-testing-series/assumption-1-revisionist-states-are-the-cause-of-great-power-competition/>.

trends in the security environment erode strategic stability. The sources of instability in a multipolar world are not limited to the US-Russian rivalry but have different origins and local implications. In 2023, the US Department of State commissioned a report that focuses on using deterrence and arms control to address challenges posed by future nuclear-armed strategic peers, including China.¹⁵

The US views that Russia has increased its dependence on nuclear weapons,¹⁶ and both Russia and China are lowering the barriers to nuclear use, eroding the firebreak between conventional and nuclear conflict. As per American open-source estimates, the number of Russian nuclear warheads assigned for use by long-range strategic launchers and shorter-range nuclear forces is approximately 4,489 warheads. An additional 999 warheads are in storage, along with 1,816 non-strategic warheads. Warheads awaiting dismantlement contribute to a total inventory of approximately 5,589 warheads.¹⁷

The Russians and Chinese view these matters differently and have blamed the US for overplaying its hand. Recently, Russia dismissed US warning about Russian nuclear capability in space, calling it a “malicious fabrication” and a ruse aimed at getting American lawmakers to approve more money to counter Russia.¹⁸ Since the US withdrew from the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty in 2002 under President Bush’s watch¹⁹ and

15. Media Note, “Report on Deterrence in a World of Nuclear Multipolarity,” *United States Department of State* (blog), November 15, 2023, <https://www.state.gov/secretarys-international-security-advisory-board-releases-report-on-deterrence-in-a-world-of-nuclear-multipolarity/>.

16. Kristensen, Hans M. Korda, Matt. Johns, Eliana. “Nuclear Notebook: Russian Nuclear Weapons, 2023.” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* (blog), May 9, 2023. <https://thebulletin.org/premium/2023-05/nuclear-notebook-russian-nuclear-weapons-2023/>.

17. “Nuclear Notebook.”

18. Faulconbridge, Guy. Holland, Steve. Zengerle, Patricia. “Kremlin Dismisses US Warning about Russian Nuclear Capability in Space.” *Reuters*, February 16, 2024. <https://www.reuters.com/world/kremlin-dismisses-us-warning-about-russian-nuclear-capability-space-2024-02-15/>.

19. Kimball, Daryl. Reif, Kingston. “The Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty at a Glance.” *Arms Control Association* (blog), December 2020. <https://www.arms-control.org/>

began a three-decade-long modernizing plan for its strategic capabilities at the cost of USD 1.3 trillion in President Obama's tenure,²⁰ the strategic instability with Russia has been on the rocks. Both States have exchanged blame for treaty violations that led to the suspension of the New START (Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty)²¹ and Russian de-ratification of the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT).²²

New START has been a bilateral arms control process on the reduction of nuclear forces, whereas the CTBT is a multilateral treaty that seeks to ban nuclear weapons testing comprehensively. Since the US only signed and not ratified the treaty, Russia also climbed to the American level.

Chinese consider that the traditional de-facto mutual vulnerability relationship with the US is eroding because Washington aspires to develop first strike capability against Beijing.²³ Chinese experts characterize the relationship with the US as one of “asymmetric strategic stability” and despite the asymmetries, both sides have a degree of mutual vulnerability to each other’s counterattack. Since neither side can prevent a retaliatory strike, the incentives for a first strike are presumably less.

There is a concern in China that American innovations in military technology over the past few decades have undermined strategic stability. The balance of military capabilities that

[control.org/factsheets/abmtreaty](https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/abmtreaty).

20. Bugos, Shannon. “US Nuclear Modernization Programs.” Arms Control Association (blog), January 2022. <https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/USNuclearModernization>.

21. Fact Sheet, “Understanding the New START Agreement,” *Center for Arms Control and Non-Proliferation* (blog), February 2024, <https://armscontrolcenter.org/understanding-new-start-agreement/>.

22. News Desk. “Lavrov Sends Notification on Withdrawal of CTBT Ratification to UN Secretary General.” TASS (blog), November 3, 2023. <https://tass.com/politics/1701531>.

23. Alison A. Kaufman and Brian Waidelich, “PRC Writings on Strategic Deterrence: Technological Disruption and the Search for Strategic Stability,” Occasional Paper Series (Virginia: Center for Naval Analyses, February 17, 2023), 27, <https://www.cna.org/reports/2023/04/prc-writings-on-strategic-deterrence>.

allowed China to maintain a relatively small nuclear deterrent is becoming more fragile. As technological dynamics evolve, the Chinese emphasize the need to define strategic capabilities more broadly than in the past.²⁴

Senior Chinese officials have expressed a broader, all-encompassing view in conceptualizing strategic stability, believing that the global security environment, great power rivalry, unilateralism, and new security challenges posed by emerging technologies complicate the pursuit of stability.²⁵

The creation of the so-called Indo-Pacific security construct by re-christening the Asia-Pacific region, the initiation of AUKUS – a trilateral alliance between Australia, the UK, and the US – that, among other things includes a provision for providing nuclear-attack submarines (SSNs) to Australia, the formation of Quad (US, India, Japan, and Australia), and the building up of India’s military power are sources of China’s increasing security dilemma and shall compel it to respond.

Challenges in the Indian Ocean Region

Geostrategic Context

The Subcontinent is the largest landmass, the most populous sub-region, and a resource-rich region. It is also one of the most unstable regions due to unresolved territorial disputes. There is a maximum concentration of nuclear powers in the IOR, with Russia and China to the north and NATO’s nuclear-armed states operating in the Arabian Sea.

24. David Santoro, “Should the United States Acknowledge Mutual Vulnerability with China?” (Honolulu: Pacific Forum, June 1, 2022). <https://pacforum.org/publications/pacnet-31-should-the-united-states-acknowledge-mutual-vulnerability-with-china/>.

25. Speeches, “Remarks by H.E. Mr. Fu Cong, Director-General of the Department of Arms Control of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China on ‘The Future of Arms Control and Non-Proliferation Regime’ at the 2019 Moscow Non-Proliferation Conference,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the People’s Republic of China, November 8, 2019, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjdt_665385/

India nuclearized the Subcontinent in 1974²⁶ and began nuclearizing the IOR in the 1980s once it leased a Russian nuclear submarine.²⁷ India's aspirations for great power status, which were the prime motive for its pursuit of nuclear weapons²⁸ and current intercontinental targeting capabilities, coupled with American fears of China's rise as a near-peer in the economic and military domain, have created strategic friction.²⁹ Among other things, these developments have exacerbated grave security risks for Pakistan, forcing it to develop a nuclear weapons capability initially³⁰ and now attempt to maintain a balance against the asymmetric rise in New Delhi's nuclear and conventional military power.

All the littoral and some extra-regional nuclear powers have enduring security interests in the IOR. They are enmeshed in geopolitical and geo-economic competition, adding a layer of complexity to the bilateral Pakistan-India animus and an uneasy security environment. Attuned to maximizing its power through alliances, the US adopted a policy aimed at bolstering India as a counterweight to China, further deteriorating the regional balance.³¹

26. Web Desk. "Pokhran I: India's First Nuclear Bomb Test Was Carried Out Underground and Code Named 'Smiling Buddha.'" India Today, May 18, 2018. <https://www.indiatoday.in/education-today/gk-current-affairs/story/pokhran-i-first-nuclear-atomic-bomb-test-of-india-324141-2016-05-18>.

27. Press Trust of India. "India Signs Pact with Russia on Chakra-3 Attack Submarine." The Economic Times, March 8, 2019. <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/india-signs-pact-with-russia-on-chakra-3-attack-submarine/articleshow/68307218.cms?from=mdr>.

28. J. Mohan Malik, "India Goes Nuclear: Rationale, Benefits, Costs and Implications," *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 20, no. 2 (1998): 192, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25798420>.

29. Col Douglas A. Castle, "Shaping China's Rise through Strategic Friction," USAWC Strategy Research Project (Pennsylvania: US Army War College, March 15, 2006), 7, <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/tr/pdf/ADA448436.pdf>.

30. Anderson, John Ward. Khan, Kamran. "Pakistan Sets Off Nuclear Blasts." Washington Post, May 28, 1998. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1998/05/29/pakistan-sets-off-nuclear-blasts/be94cba3-7ff-4ecc-9f67-ac6ddfe2a94c/>.

31. Dr Zulfqar Khan, "Strategic Conundrum of US – China and India – Pakistan: A Perspective," *Margalla Papers* 20, no. 1 (December 30, 2016): 42, <https://margallapapers.ndu.edu.pk/site/issue/download/11/144>; Daniel Markey, Andrew Scobell, and Vikram J. Singh, "China, India and Pakistan: Tenuous Stability Risks

In that regard, the US envisions India as a “net security provider” in the IOR and has deepened technological sharing foundations in several agreements.³² Jointly, they vie for supremacy, control over crucial chokepoints, and access to resources.

The economic vitality of the IOR makes it volatile³³ because India is building strong military and naval capabilities with Western and Russian assistance. Although the divergences between the US-led West and Russia have increased, forcing smaller countries to, at times, pick sides, India has successfully played with both camps.

India’s Growing Capabilities

India is the elephant in the IOR’s room and the major source of problems and strategic instability. Four primary sources of strategic instability in the IOR have been explained below. These are the outstanding territorial disputes between Pakistan and India, New Delhi’s growing missile and nuclear arsenal, its irresponsible behavior, and the role of extra-regional powers. The well-known outstanding territorial disputes lie at the heart of the Pakistan-India animus, and unless these are resolved, all other efforts shall only be cosmetic.

India’s growing strategic capabilities increase Pakistan’s security dilemma and of other over thirty littorals, out of which only a few enjoy good relations with New Delhi. India possesses intercontinental nuclear weapons targeting capabilities, which extend beyond China and can potentially target Russia. Its upcoming missiles will cover the entire globe, and if alliance networks were to change in the distant future, these capabilities could cause concerns for NATO and other Indo-Pacific partners.

“Nuclear War” (United States Institute of Peace, May 17, 2022), <https://www.usip.org/publications/2022/05/china-india-and-pakistan-tenuous-stability-risks-nuclear-war>. May 17, 2022.

32. Sufian Ullah and Zeeshan Hayat, “India as a Net Security Provider in Indo-Pacific and Implications for the Region,” *NUST Journal of International Peace & Stability* 4, no. 1 (2021): 31, <https://njiips.nust.edu.pk/index.php/njiips/article/download/77/73/>.

33. Netajee Abhinandan, “Changing Security Environment in Indian Ocean,” 140.

India's long-range targeting capabilities do not apparently present a threat to Western security, but its behavior suggests that it can espouse and fulfill such ambitions under a tactfully crafted veneer. Experts like Onkar Marwah and Ann Schulz³⁴ have eluded that the Indian nuclear program was initiated in 1944, even before the US tested its first nuclear weapon.

The data and satellite imagery on India's long-range missile capabilities and arsenal size indicate that it has the third-largest nuclear weapons program in the world, after the US and Russia. However, its nuclear security and conduct as a nuclear-armed state are bellwether about the long-term risks it can pose to the world.

Its nuclear posture places a premium on intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs), so-called tactical nuclear weapons (TNWs),³⁵ and hypersonic and supersonic cruise missiles. A sizeable portion of its delivery vectors is deployed and nuclear-armed to launch intercontinental strikes. There is a risk that strategic stability at the global level becomes increasingly fragile.

New Delhi maintains opacity about spending on its fast-growing nuclear triad. However, its defense spending and budget can give a fair idea.³⁶ India spent USD 81.4 billion in 2022 on defense, ranking third highest in the world, surpassing

34. Onkar S. Marwah and Ann Schulz, *Nuclear Proliferation and the Near-Nuclear Countries* (Cambridge, Mass.: Ballinger Publishing Co, 1975), 141, https://inis.iaea.org/search/search.aspx?orig_q=RN:8315654; Onkar Marwah, "India's Nuclear and Space Programs: Intent and Policy," *International Security* 2, no. 2 (1977): 98, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2538728>.

35. Dahlgren, Masao. "India Developing New Tactical Ballistic Missile." *Missile Threat, CSIS* (blog), February 7, 2020. <https://missilethreat.csis.org/india-developing-new-tactical-ballistic-missile/>; Publications/ Reports, "Annual Report 2011-2012" (Department of Defence, Government of India, October 31, 2015), 98, <https://mod.gov.in/dod/annual-report-year-2011-2012>.

36. Sarkar, Urvashi. "What's Known—and Not Known—about India's Nuclear Weapons Budget." *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* (blog), November 2, 2021. <https://thebulletin.org/2021/11/whats-known-and-not-known-about-indias-nuclear-weapons-budget/>.

Russia's. A measured fourteen-year-old assessment held that India would spend about 0.5 percent or more of its GDP on nuclear forces. However, another assessment in 2018 estimated that India spent USD 1.7 billion on nuclear forces in 2017, which raises doubts about the accuracy of the other assessment.³⁷

The country possesses an array of battlefield and long-range weapons supposedly held either against China or its Western neighbor, Pakistan. However, the Agni-V (7000+ kilometers),³⁸ upcoming Agni-VI (8000-12000 kilometers), and Surya (12000-16000 kilometers) missiles shall have the entire globe within their target range. Does New Delhi need ICBMs for permanent membership in the UN Security Council (UNSC)? The US and all its NATO partners support India's plea for reform of the Security Council. ICBMs do not just win status; they are also a source of projecting power.



37. "India's Nuclear Weapons Budget."

38. News Desk, "Agni-V Can Now Strike Targets beyond 7,000 Km If India Wants; 20% Weight Reduced: Report." Hindustan Times, December 17, 2022. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/agniv-can-now-strike-targets-beyond-7-000-km-if-india-wants-20-weight-reduced-report-101671286138628.html>.

The Agni series of missiles is canister-based, which means they are kept in a ready-to-launch condition with mated warheads. India has stored these missiles in locations that could increase the chances of survivability against a retaliatory strike. These developments have been spurred since 2013, as shown in the two satellite images of an expansive location in Assam, approximately 230 kilometers south of the frontiers with China. Within a few years, the almost uninhabited Changsari mountainous area became sprawling with tunnel systems connecting a network of storage sites.

Even employing TNWs, like an upgraded derivative of Prahaar (150 kilometers), against neighboring countries can escalate to a broader nuclear war, the fallout of which would not be limited to the South Asian region.³⁹ This array of ready-to-launch missiles, backed up by a Ballistic Missile Defence (BMD) shield and Russian supplied regiments of the S-400 air defense system (400 kilometers), will increase India's confidence to contemplate risky pre-emption.

On 12 June 2019, the Defence Research and Development Organization (DRDO) conducted the maiden flight test of the BrahMos hypersonic technology demonstrator vehicle (HSTDV), using the Agni missile booster at Mach 6 speed with a scramjet engine, which failed. However, on 7 September 2020, HSTDV was successfully tested. If India uses hypersonic kill vehicles as the last stage of Agni-V, the weapon system becomes effective at intercontinental ranges. The hypersonic version BrahMos-II (Mach 8 speed) will give India the capability to breach the missile defenses of adversaries who do not possess matching capabilities. An imbalance will be created that will increase the risk of pre-emption. It needs to be ascertained whether Russia is proliferating HSTDV technology to India.⁴⁰

39. Publications/ Reports, "Annual Report 2011-2012," 98.

40. Bhan, Dr Aditya. "The Hypersonic Potential of India-Russia Military-Technical Cooperation." Observer Research Foundation (blog), August 31, 2022 <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/hypersonic-potential-of-india-russia-military-technical-cooperation>.

India is developing a fleet of six SSNs and six ballistic missile submarines (SSBNs) to give it an assured global striking capability. It has launched three SSBNs so far: INS Arihant, INS Arighat, and S4. INS Arihant is the first and only operational SSBN of India. It was commissioned in 2016 and can carry twelve K-15 (750 kilometers range) or four K-4 (3500 kilometers range) missiles.⁴¹ Following the operationalization of INS Arihant SSBN, INS Arighat is expected to be inducted into the Indian Navy in 2024. It has the same missile capacity as INS Arihant.⁴² S4 is the third SSBN, launched in November 2021.⁴³ It is larger than the previous two and can carry twenty-four K-15 or eight K-4 missiles.

India is also building a fourth SSBN, called S4,* which will have features similar to those of S4. The S4 SSBN is currently undergoing sea and weapon trials before it can be commissioned. Another S5 SSBN is also under development and expected to begin production by 2027.⁴⁴

In 2019, India sealed a USD 3 billion deal with Russia for leasing an SSN for the Indian Navy for a period of 10 years.⁴⁵ Under the deal, Russia is obligated to deliver an Akula-class submarine, to

41. Rajagopalan, Rajeswari Pillai. "Reports: India Launches 3rd Arihant Submarine." *The Diplomat* (blog), January 7, 2022. <https://thediplomat.com/2022/01/reports-india-launches-3rd-arihant-submarine/>.

42. Bhattacharjee, Sumit. "Third Arihant Class Submarine Quietly Launched in November." *The Hindu*, January 3, 2022. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/andhra-pradesh/third-arihant-class-submarine-quietly-launched-in-november/article38103275.ece>.

43. Bedi, Rahul. "India Quietly Launches Third Arihant-Class Nuclear-Powered Submarine: Report." *The Wire* (blog), December 30, 2021. <https://thewire.in/security/india-quietly-launches-its-third-arihant-class-nuclear-powered-submarine-report>.

44. Kunde, Raunak. "Indian Navy's S5 Program and P76 Get Priority over SSN Program." *Indian Defence Research Wing* (blog), May 3, 2023. <https://idrw.org/indian-navys-s5-program-and-p76-get-priority-over-ssn-program/>.

45. Press Trust of India. "India, Russia Sign \$3 Billion Deal for Nuclear-Powered Attack Submarine." *NDTV* (blog), March 7, 2019. <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/india-russia-sign-3-billion-deal-for-nuclear-powered-attack-submarine-2004364>.

be known as Chakra III, to the Indian Navy by 2025.⁴⁶ India had also acquired SSN INS-Chakra from Russia on a ten-year lease in 2011. However, INS Chakra was returned to Russia in June 2021 upon completion of its lease. India has plans to construct six SSN submarines at a cost of USD 12 Billion.⁴⁷

Armed with nuclear weapons, this fleet of Indian nuclear submarines will extend far beyond the assigned role of net security provider in the IOR. India's sea-based nuclear capable ballistic missiles include Dhanush (350 kilometers), K-15 (750 kilometers), K-4 (3500 kilometers) and K-5 (5000-6000 kilometers – currently under development). Likewise, cruise missiles that could be fitted onto SSNs include BrahMos (290 kilometers) and Nirbhay (1000 kilometers). While such capability may “make the rubble bounce”⁴⁸ in the IOR, it could also affect NATO's strategic interests if India chooses to diverge from its orbit. This enormous firepower is much beyond its regional security needs, and even as strategic partners, the US and other Western navies shall have to account for this in their calculus.

INS Vikramaditya and INS Vikrant, India's two carriers, can carry more than 35 aircraft. The Indian Navy has announced that it plans to develop a third aircraft carrier of Vikrant class to expand its deck space further.⁴⁹ Additionally, India has initiated the procurement of 26 Rafale-Marine nuclear capable aircraft from France. This aircraft acquisition consists of twenty-two single-seat jets and four twin-seat trainers, along with logistics

46. “India, Russia Sign \$3 Billion Deal.”

47. Staff. “Indian Navy's Nuclear-Powered Attack Submarine Project Before CCS For Approval, To Be Prioritised Over Second Indigenous Aircraft Carrier,” Swarajya (blog), April 19, 2021. <https://swarajyamag.com/news-brief/indian-navys-nuclear-powered-attack-submarine-project-before-ccs-for-approval-to-be-prioritised-over-second-indigenous-aircraft-carrier>.

48. Web Desk. “Winston Churchill's Inspiring Wartime Speeches in Parliament.” BBC News, May 8, 2020. <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-52588148>.

49. Web Desk. “Indian Navy Formally Announces Desire for Third Aircraft Carrier.” News Navy Recognition, September 27, 2023. <https://navyrecognition.com/index.php/naval-news/naval-news-archive/2023/september/13603-indian-navy-formally-announces-desire-for-third-aircraft-carrier.html>.

support.⁵⁰ In sum, the ongoing Indian efforts to build a flotilla of SSBNs, SSNs, and aircraft carriers would eventually increase its deterrence in the IOR and beyond.

New Delhi distinguishes itself as the fourth country after the US, Russia, and China to test the PDV-MKII as an ASAT missile on 27 March 2019. The ASAT test gave it the capability to degrade and destroy low earth orbit satellites placed for intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) purposes.⁵¹ India currently possesses twenty-five military satellites⁵² out of a total of sixty-two satellites, and it is rapidly expanding its space program.

India is also developing offensive counter-space capabilities such as Directed Energy Weapons (DEWs), including lasers, killer satellites, and co-orbital weapons.⁵³ Combined with the triad, these space weapons capabilities give it a competitive strategic advantage over many NATO members. A brief overview of India's space satellite capability is given in the table below.

Satellite Type	Navigation, Positioning, Timing (PNT)	Communications	Electronic Intelligence/ Signal Intelligence	ISR
	7 IRNSS	2 (GSAT-7/- 7A)	1 EMISAT	15 (9 Cartosat & 6 RISAT)

50. Pandi, Rajat. "India Kicks off Formal Procurement Process for 26 Naval French Rafale Fighters." The Times of India, October 28, 2023. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/india-kicks-off-formal-procurement-process-for-26-naval-french-rafae-fighters/articleshow/104764785.cms>.

51. Press Releases. "Mission Shakti - ASAT Missile Test on 27 Mar 2019." DRDO, Ministry of Defence, Government of India (blog), 2020. <https://www.drdo.gov.in/drdo/mission-shakti>.

52. The International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), *The Military Balance* 2023 (London: Routledge, 2023), 95, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003400226>.

53. Pandit, Rajat. "Satellite-Killer Not a One-off, India Working on Star Wars Armoury." The Times of India, April 7, 2019. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/satellite-killer-not-a-one-off-india-working-on-star-wars-armoury/articleshow/68758674.cms>; IAS Insights. "India's Anti-Satellite (ASAT) Missile." UPSC IAS (blog), May 2, 2019. <https://www.insightsonindia.com/2019/05/02/indiass-anti-satellite-asat-missile/>.

India began its nuclear program in the 1940s, tested a nuclear device in 1974,⁵⁴ and conducted five further tests, including a thermonuclear weapon, in 1998. It has the third-largest defense budget and third-largest inventory of nuclear capable triad of missiles. Its weapons grade plutonium (WGP) and highly enriched uranium (HEU) needs should match these delivery systems requirements. The annual assessments by the International Panel for Fissile Material (IPFM) and other international open domain sources portray India as even lagging behind its much smaller neighbor, Pakistan, which is against conventional wisdom. IPFM's latest estimate suggests that India has 150 warheads.⁵⁵ The table below illustrates this variation and indicates that to fuel its large triad, ambition, and test thermonuclear weapons, India needs a larger stock of weapon grade fissile material for warheads. The worry is that the larger the number of warheads, the bigger the threat it poses beyond its regional needs.

Warhead Estimates	
Sources & Experts	Count
Jacob Cohn, Adam Lemon and Evan Braden Montgomery (Centre for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, US, 2017)	2207
Dr Mansoor Ahmad (Belfer Centre, 2017)	2261-2686

According to one estimate, India has produced approximately 700 kilograms of WGP, sufficient for building 138 to 213 nuclear warheads. However, not all the material has been converted into nuclear warheads. Likewise, India's stockpile of WGP is about 0.7 ± 0.15 tons, which is either already in weapons or available for weapons. Furthermore, India reportedly has plans to build at least one more Plutonium production reactor.

54. Onkar S. Marwah and Ann Schulz, *Nuclear Proliferation, and the Near-Nuclear Countries*, 141; Onkar Marwah, "India's Nuclear and Space Programs," 98.

55. Publications. "Country Profile India." International Panel on Fissile Materials (blog), April 29, 2023. <https://fissilematerials.org/countries/india.html>.

India also has a large stockpile of reactor-grade Pu (RGP), which has been separated from unsafeguarded heavy-water power reactors. This type of Pu has a lower proportion of the desirable isotope of Pu for nuclear weapons (Pu 239) and is more difficult and riskier to use in bombs. However, some experts argue that India could use this material for making thermonuclear weapons or boosting fission weapons. The current stockpile of RGP in India is estimated to be about 8.5 tons.

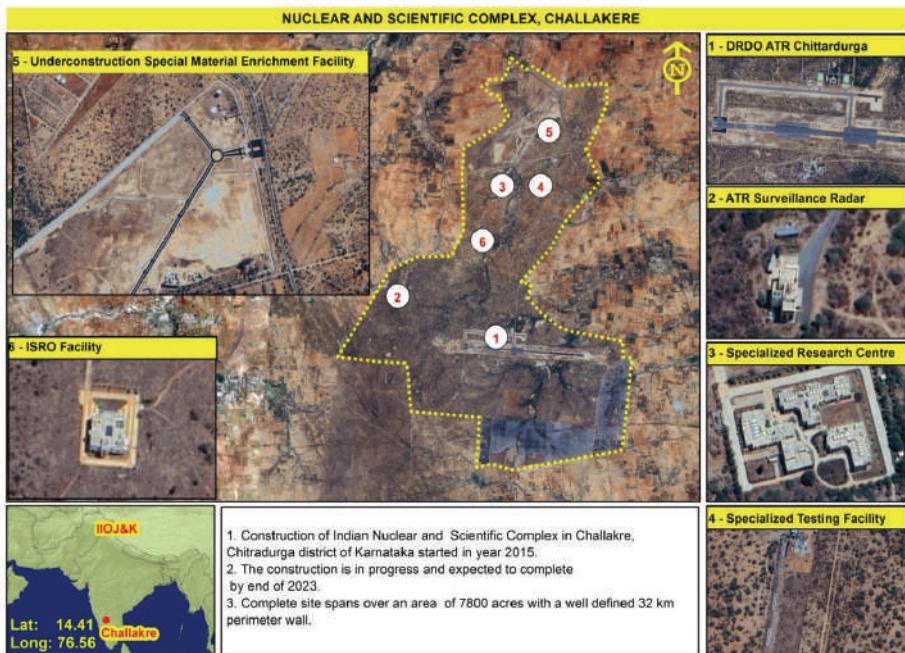
The degree of uncertainty surrounding India's nuclear capabilities can be understood by Challakere Nuclear City's example. This project produces fuel for its submarines and is also accumulating enough fissile material for likely testing of thermonuclear weapons. The project is run by two secretive agencies: the DRDO and the Bhabha Atomic Research Centre (BARC).

The exact capacity of the Challakere nuclear city is not publicly known. However, some experts estimate that it will be the largest military-run complex of nuclear centrifuges, atomic-research laboratories, and weapons- and aircraft-testing facilities in the Subcontinent when it is completed. The project is expected to include a Special Material Enrichment Facility (SMEF) that will enrich uranium for various purposes.

One of the controversial goals of the project, according to some retired Indian government officials and independent experts, is to give India an extra stockpile of HEU that could be used in new hydrogen bombs, also known as thermonuclear weapons. Institute for Science and International Security (ISIS) estimated that SMEF "capacity should be expected to involve more than 100,000 Separative Work Units (SWU) per year or even be several times this size."

If the Challakere nuclear city has a similar enrichment capacity as Iran's Natanz facility and uses all its output for producing HEU with an enrichment level of 90 percent, which is weapons grade, then it could produce about 0.3 tons of HEU per year. This quantity could be sufficient for making about seventy-

five warheads with a design akin to the W76 warhead in the American arsenal.



Revisionist Intent

India has been a revisionist state since its very inception, driven by ambitions to emerge as a global power – an objective that it sought to achieve by embarking on its quest to acquire nuclear weapons almost immediately after its independence. It is an open secret that India eyes a permanent place amongst the P5 and the status of regional hegemon despite pursuing destabilizing conflicts with its neighbors. Former Indian Prime Minister I K Gujral's statement encapsulates India's enduring aspiration to revise the global security order with great power ambition:

I told President Clinton that when my third eye looks at the door of the Security Council Chamber, it sees a little sign that says only those with economic power or nuclear weapons are allowed. I said to him it's [exceedingly] difficult to achieve economic wealth.

As the US props it up in attaining net security provider status, it is questionable whether India will be a reliable partner in the US Indo-Pacific strategy. Even Indian experts either doubt their country's ability or are signaling that India will not sacrifice New Delhi for Washington. For instance:

For India, a bipolar international system dominated by China and the US is a bad deal... whether the US and China compete or accommodate each other in a bipolar world, India has reasons to worry.

India often uses China as a bogey to play on Western interests. For instance, in General S Padmanabhan's book, "The Writing on The Wall: India Checkmates America 2017," he indicates how India focused on the Sino-India rapprochement in the 2000s and distanced itself from the US political and military decisions. The idea of India fighting a war with Pakistan while simultaneously improving relations with China is also put forth. Despite India's perpetual claim that its military capability is directed against China, 70 to 80 percent of India's weaponry and forces are directed against Pakistan. Moreover, in 2022, China emerged as India's largest trade partner, with a whopping USD 115 billion worth of trade.

India's Strategic Behavior

Contrary to its professed interest in building strategic stability, New Delhi has shown a propensity to seek space for war below the nuclear overhang. Its growing revisionist ambitions and irresponsible behavior could outrun the common ground, and the US may have to counteract to maintain order.

"Responsible" is a subjective term, but a comparison between India and Pakistan's conduct as nuclear powers is imperative. The Table on Responsible Behavior compares against eight criteria, including the preservation of strategic stability and actions consistent with declaratory policies. Pakistan does not seek any space for war under the nuclear overhang and seeks dispute resolution.

Criterion	Pakistan	India
Preservation of strategic stability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Believes no space for war – resolve disputes Delivery systems Bharat specific 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Seeks space for war under nuclear overhang – no dialogue – crises management Intercontinental ranges
Actions consistent with declaratory policies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Policy of credible minimum deterrence and No-NFU (NTI Factsheet, 2015) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Indian statements (Defense Minister, 2016; PM Qatal Ki Raat, 2019) Development of counter-force capabilities indicate shift from NFU to pre-emptive first strike or FU option
Prevent unauthorized and inadvertent use	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Centralized control (Carnegie's study, 2016) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Delegative control Command and control of SSBNs BrahMos incident
Measures to prevent accidents, involving nuclear weapons	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> PALs Two-man rule (Carnegie's study, 2016) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No transparency about measures taken to avoid such eventuality (ORF, 2015)
Minimalism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ensures that it develops only that number of nuclear weapons which can credibly deter [Bharat] – Report of Congressional Research Service, 2011 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Despite minimalism, continues to add novel weapon systems in inventory and possesses fissile material stocks to develop up to 2600 warheads (Belfer Center, 2017)
Independent regulator for safeguarded facilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> PNRA is autonomous (IAEA, 2017) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Does not have an independent nuclear regulator (NTI, 2020)
Adherence to nuclear non-proliferation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Export control laws are at par with international standards (NSS, 2016) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1974 – CIRUS fuel diverted (U.S.) Lapses in nuclear safety and security regime hint towards contribution towards proliferation (Center for Public Integrity, U.S., 2015)
IAEA safeguards	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> All civil facilities under safeguards with an impeccable record No safety and security incident 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 8 of 22 plants unsafeguarded – more weapons (Belfer Centre, 2018) 2013, U ore stolen for crude bomb (Levy, 2015)

Responsible Behavior

However, India's conduct has contradicted these two fundamental principles crucial for preserving strategic stability.

Indian leadership's actions are inconsistent with their declaratory policies of No First Use (NFU) and their conduct in crises. New Delhi has historically maintained a conditional NFU policy, but its recent signaling indicates a potential rescinding of the NFU pledge. Moreover, India does not accept China's unconditional NFU pledge.

Likewise, India claimed that its BrahMos missile errantly landed in Pakistani territory on 9 March 2022. Whether deliberate, inadvertent, or accidental, this was an unprecedented event between two nuclear powers in the last seven decades. As international experts observed, the incident posed significant dangers for four principal reasons. First, the missile endangered many commercial air traffic routes in the region. Second, the missile could have destroyed a populated area or military installation. Third, had Pakistan not exercised pragmatism and restraint, the incident could have escalated into a grave nuclear crisis.⁵⁶ Fourth, it raised serious concerns about operational safety procedures and controls in India, particularly regarding the proximity of missiles kept in a ready-to-launch condition near the frontiers with Pakistan.⁵⁷

In this episode, India did not immediately communicate with Pakistan,⁵⁸ which was deliberate and casts a shadow on its claim that the incident was inadvertent. This deliberate action reflects reckless behavior that does not behoove a responsible nuclear state.⁵⁹ Can the West trust India as a net security provider despite its risk-taking behavior?

Reliability as a Net Security Provider

The US has always espoused lofty expectations from India, but it does not fail to disappoint America. New Delhi not only refused to align with Washington during the Cold War but also forged warm ties with Moscow instead. After the Cold War,

56. Das, Debak. "Not Much Happened after India's Accidental Cruise Missile Launch into Pakistan—This Time." Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists (blog), March 25, 2022. <https://thebulletin.org/2022/03/not-much-happened-after-indias-accidental-cruise-missile-launch-into-pakistan-this-time/>.

57. Kimball, Daryl G. "India Accidentally Fires Missile Into Pakistan." Arms Control Association (blog), April 2022. <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2022-04/news/india-accidentally-fires-missile-into-pakistan>.

58. Clary, Christopher. "The Curious Case of the Accidental Indian Missile Launch." War on the Rocks (blog), March 17, 2022. <https://warontherocks.com/2022/03/the-curious-case-of-the-accidental-indian-missile-launch/>.

59. Shad, Hassan Aslam. "Did India Purposefully Fire a BrahMos Missile at Pakistan?" The National Interest (blog), March 21, 2022. <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/buzz/did-india-purposely-fire-brahmos-missile-pakistan-201341>.

estrangement between the two democracies began receding, and they entered a strategic partnership in 2005 in which the US unilaterally continued to invest with little return. That would force one to ask, *How Deep is Your Love?*⁶⁰ The list of American disappointments regarding Indian conduct and reliability as a strategic ally is becoming inexhaustive.

The US has at times faced a patchy relationship with India, one “marred by deep distrust and sharp differences.”⁶¹ Michael Shulman argues that this is because Indian foreign policy is erratic: “One moment, India’s leaders appear aligned with Washington; the next, they march off in their own direction, sometimes to parley with America’s enemies.”⁶²

Framing democratic values as the cornerstone of the US-Indian relationship has been a weak strategy, and the notion of common values has become fanciful. India refused to work with the US in coercing Iran over its nuclear ambitions. India has maintained friendly ties with Myanmar’s military regime. Most recently, it has refused to take the Western side to condemn Russia’s actions in its conflict with Ukraine.

Since Narendra Modi assumed office as the Prime Minister, India’s conduct as a democracy has become increasingly suspect and has created difficulties for the US and other Western suitors. Hindu nationalism pervades India’s foreign policy, and they take pride in galvanizing Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and its affiliated groups globally. Fearing loss in business and political influence in New Delhi, neither the Biden administration nor its Western allies criticize “Indian illiberalism.”⁶³ A seasoned American expert expressed this sense most succinctly:

60. *How Deep Is Your Love* (YouTube, 2009), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XpqqjU7u5Yc>.

61. Schuman, Michael. “What Limits Any US Alliance With India Over China.” *The Atlantic* (blog), March 1, 2023. <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2023/03/india-relations-us-china-modi/673237/>.

62. “What Limits Any US Alliance with India.”

63. Daniel S. Markey, “The Strategic Implications of India’s Illiberalism and Democratic Erosion,” *The National Bureau of Asian Research* 17, no. 1 (January 27, 2022), <https://www.nbr.org/publication/the-strategic-implications-of-indias-illiberalism-and-democratic-erosion/>.

[The pattern of New Delhi's conduct shows] that deep down India is not an ally and [its relationship with the oldest democracy and leader of the free world] is fundamentally [different than American mutual reliance] on a NATO member. And India will never aspire to that sort of alliance. For this reason, US officials should not frame their agreements with India as the building blocks of a deeper relationship. The country is not a candidate for initiatives such as the AUKUS deal among Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States (which will help Australia develop nuclear submarine technologies) because such deals entail sharing important security vulnerabilities that only sturdy liberal democracies – ones with broadly shared values and aspirations – can safely exchange.⁶⁴

In June 2020, the Galwan crisis brought to the fore the question of whether New Delhi should deter China any further by forming a military alliance with the US.⁶⁵ Brookings was of the view that PM Modi struggled to respond with tough talk to appease the domestic audience of nationalists and hardliners because he understands that his country is not able to stand against China.⁶⁶ Whereas, New Delhi may be unwilling to carry America's water and contain Beijing. The following assessment nails the issue:

The pro-US lobbies within the BJP government have raised China bogey to bargain for strong defense ties between the US and India. Modi government is raising China bogey to strengthen its leverage with the US. New Delhi will never follow the hard journey of taking an aggressive posture against China for Washington's benefit. India cannot risk conflict with China because of the vast amount of trade

64. Markey, Daniel. "India as It Is." *Foreign Affairs*, June 16, 2023. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/india/markey-modi-biden-united-states>.

65. Madan, Tanvi. "The US-India Relationship and China," Brookings (blog), September 23, 2014. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-u-s-india-relationship-and-china/>.

66. "The US-India Relationship and China."

ties and military asymmetry. India and the US are unreliable allies that are bound together by the US-led China containment. If one removes China from this unnatural partnership, there leaves no reason for much-touted Indo-US strategic relations.⁶⁷

India's strategic autonomy is a form of hedging that allows it to pursue its interests and avoid seriously committing to any side in the US-China rivalry. This behavior is a mutation of realism and its traditional non-aligned posture, and that, among other things, seeks to balance between cooperation and competition.⁶⁸

The West does not openly question India's inconsistent behavior because this can produce unpredictable outcomes. New Delhi can shift its alignment depending on the situation and the perceived benefits.⁶⁹ India's neutrality and strategic relations with China, Russia, and the West have disappointed and frustrated its partners.⁷⁰ The Biden administration has been struggling to find success in India, and how India's domestic policies and regional ambitions have undermined its credibility and trustworthiness.⁷¹ For instance, India confronted Google over its AI platform's responses, which suggested that some experts believe Modi's policies to be "fascist."⁷² If Indian strategic autonomy continues to increase, shouldn't the US and its NATO

67. "The US-India Relationship."

68. Fact Sheet. "Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States." The White House (blog), February 11, 2022. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2022/02/11/fact-sheet-indo-pacific-strategy-of-the-united-states/>.

69. A Grieco, Dr Kelly. "In Forum: 2024 — US Strategy and the Indo-Pacific."

9Dashline (blog), January 31, 2024. <https://www.9dashline.com/article/in-forum-2024-us-strategy-and-the-indo-pacific>.

70. Chang, Felix K. "India's Neutrality and Strategic Relations with China, Russia, and the West - Foreign Policy Research Institute." Foreign Policy Research Institute (blog), April 25, 2022. <https://www.fpri.org/article/2022/04/indian-foreign-policy-and-the-russian-ukrainian-war/>.

71. Kapur, S. Paul. "Significant Shortcomings Alert: Biden Is Struggling to Find Success in India." The National Interest (blog) (The Center for the National Interest, April 11, 2021). <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/significant-shortcomings-alert-biden-struggling-find-success-india-182324>.

72. Dhillon, Amrit. "India Confronts Google over Gemini AI Tool's 'Fascist Modi' Responses." The Guardian, February 26, 2024. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/feb/26/india-confronts-google-over-gemini-ai-tools-fascist-modi-responses>.

partners reconsider placing their bets on the horse expected to work for their competition with other great powers?

Role of Extra-regional Powers

The US and the West have courted New Delhi into a long-term strategic partnership and have opened cutting-edge technologies and economic and political spigots to support and strengthen India as a counterweight to China.

In this regard, the US has led the horde. The latest American Integrated Country Strategy for India⁷³ and Pakistan⁷⁴ clearly sets its long-term priorities and the impact these shall have on pursuing strategic stability in the IOR. For India, the US Department of State has outlined four goals: to support India's role as the net security provider in the so-called Indo-Pacific region; to strengthen India's military capabilities for global impact; to provide for common defense by expanding the strong and growing major defense partnership to improve US-Indian "interoperability," and to build defense capacity and combined capabilities, increase cooperation, and work with the likeminded partners to ensure regional security.

For Pakistan, US expectations are as follows: that the country's military capabilities should not pose a threat to the US or its allies and partners, and to collaborate with Pakistan to advance strategic stability and discourage actions that could lead to destabilization. The apparent difference between the two policies is that the onus of maintaining strategic stability is placed on Pakistan. In building up India, the US perhaps expects Pakistan to Finlandize to India – the latter is a pejorative term that refers to Finland playing second fiddle to the former Soviet Union in all policy matters in return for guarantees of maintaining nominal independence. The above propositions are further explained below.

73. Public Release, "Country Profile India," Integrated Country Strategy (Washington, D.C.: US Department of State, May 27, 2022), https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/ICS_SCA_India_Public.pdf.

74. "Country Profile India."

The contrasting approaches of the US toward India and Pakistan are disruptive to the pursuit of strategic stability in the IOR. While the US seeks to enhance India's role and capabilities as a net security provider and a major defense partner, it expects Pakistan to refrain from actions that could destabilize the region and pose a threat to the US or its allies. This would imply that the US views India as a strategic ally and Pakistan as a potential adversary in the IOR. Such a policy is detrimental to the strategic stability and security of the region, as well as the long-term interests of the US because Pakistan is an American major non-NATO ally.⁷⁵

The US-India defense partnership is creating a strategic imbalance and exacerbating a security dilemma for Pakistan, which faces a security threat from India's growing military capabilities and ambitions. India is an existential enemy and seeks global hegemony. As elaborated above, Pakistan developed nuclear weapons and delivery systems only to deter India. The US support for India's military modernization, especially in the domains of naval, space, and cyber warfare, as well as its endorsement of India's bid for the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) membership and a permanent seat in the UN Security Council, has increased IOR's instability. The US-India alliance will embolden India to adopt a more aggressive and coercive posture toward Pakistan, thus undermining Pakistan's strategic deterrence and sovereignty.⁷⁶

The US-India defense partnership is fueling competition in the IOR, compelling China to focus more on military measures than economic initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

China has vital interests and stakes in the IOR, as it relies on the Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs) for its energy and

75. Fact Sheet. "Major Non-NATO Ally Status." Bureau of Political-Military Affairs, US Department of State (blog), January 20, 2021. <https://www.state.gov/major-non-nato-ally-status/>.

76. Shreya Upadhyay, "India-US Defence Partnership: Challenges and Prospects," *Indian Foreign Affairs Journal* 14, no. 2 (2019): 116–28, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48636718>.

trade flows and has invested heavily in the BRI, especially the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which connects China's western region to the Arabian Sea. China views the US-India alliance as a part of the US strategy of containing China's peaceful engagement in the region and has responded by engaging other countries in the IOR, such as Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Myanmar, and Djibouti.⁷⁷ This has led to an increase in strategic mistrust and rivalry between the US and China, and between India and China, in the IOR, which could escalate into a conflict or a crisis.

The US-India defense partnership is not in the long-term interests of the US, as it risks alienating Pakistan, a key partner in the fight against terrorism and extremism in the region, and provoking China, a major economic partner and strategic competitor of the US.

The US needs to maintain a balanced and constructive relationship with both Pakistan and China, as they are important actors in the regional and global order and have a stake in the stability and prosperity of the IOR. The US should not pursue a zero-sum or a binary approach toward India and Pakistan or India and China but rather seek to engage them in dialogue⁷⁸ and cooperation on issues of common concern, such as maritime security, counter-terrorism,⁷⁹ climate change, and trade. The US should also respect the legitimate interests and aspirations of Pakistan and China in the IOR and avoid actions that could be seen as hostile or hegemonic.

The biased US policy toward India and Pakistan in the IOR is creating strategic instability and insecurity in the region,

77. "India-US Defence Partnership."

78. Kaura, Vinay. "The Pakistan Factor in China's Afghanistan Policy: Emerging Regional Faultlines amid US Withdrawal." Middle East Institute, July 6, 2021. <https://www.mei.edu/publications/pakistan-factor-chinas-afghanistan-policy-emerging-regional-faultlines-amid-us>.

79. Sanam Noor, "Pakistan-India Relations and Terrorism," Pakistan Institute of International Affairs 60, no. 2 (2007): 65–84, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41500064>.

ultimately undermining the US's long-term interests. It has encouraged American NATO allies like France and the UK to follow suit to complement strategic interests and make hay in the large market for their military industries.

New Delhi has leveraged its strategic geographic location in the IOR and its large population and market to extract maximum benefits from both the West and Russia. Both camps have made heavy technological investments in India. Except for some economic gains, the West has yet to harvest tangible returns for propping up India. The “net security” it seeks is becoming more elusive due to increasing regional asymmetries. This approach needs reconsideration, and there is a need to adopt a more inclusive and cooperative one that considers all stakeholders’ perspectives and interests in the IOR and promotes a peaceful and prosperous regional order.

Conclusion

The IOR faces strategic instability due to the interplay of various factors, including India’s power ambitions, growing contestation between great powers, and the widening gap in nuclear and conventional power asymmetries between Pakistan and India. New Delhi’s nuclear enterprise fuels its global power ambition and is beyond its perceived security needs against China and Pakistan. Its burgeoning missiles program, fissile material stocks for nuclear warheads, development of sea-based nuclear weapons, and outer-space weapons capabilities outpace its declared regional intent.

For reasons elaborated in this paper, India’s growing revisionist ambitions and irresponsible behavior can potentially outrun the common ground, and the US may have to counteract to maintain order. The US may look the other way toward growing Indian capabilities and behavior, but this may have to change in the future. History proves that friends and enemies switch roles. If India can play arch-rivals and claim strategic autonomy today, it will become a pole itself and work against American interests once its dependence reduces.

Some Western states have placed their bets on India, but they may inadvertently be building its capabilities to the point that New Delhi may become a source of insecurity for themselves. New Delhi's nuclear enterprise is outgrowing the requirements of containing China; apparently, there is no plan to address that. James Madison's central tenet of the US government that the "ambition must be made to counteract ambition"⁸⁰ can also apply to its allies and partners whose ambitions can affect the post-Second World War rules-based order and American leadership of the free world.

80. James Madison, "The Structure of the Government Must Furnish the Proper Checks and Balances Between the Different Departments," Paper essay (Washington, D.C.: National Constitution Center, February 8, 1788), <https://constitutioncenter.org/education/classroom-resource-library/classroom/6.5-primary-source-james-madison-federalist-no-51-1788>.