Rethinking Strategic Security in South Asia: The Nuclear Dynamics of China, India and Pakistan

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Abstract

The research aims to attain at determining the military, political, and most specifically nuclear risks for South Asia in the context of the complex China-Pakistan-India nuclear triangle. The dynamic of China-Pakistan-India nuclear triangle, as well as evolution of their political relationship throughout the history, have been discussed and explained, at length, in the literature. The triangle has emerged from the dynamic of four states comprising of conflicting bilateral pairs – India and US on the one hand and Pakistan and China on the other. The most pressing concern in the given scenario is that how this dynamic can or is impacting the equation of strategic security. It is no doubt a disconcerting fact that three nuclear powers exist in the same region with contiguous borders. The research also delves into how the nuclear capabilities of China, India, and Pakistan have altered their strategic calculations and influence regional strategic security. It explores the concept of deterrence within the China-Pakistan-India nuclear triangle, emphasizing the risks of miscalculations and escalation due to historical tensions and territorial disputes. The presence of nuclear weapons in such a volatile region raises the stakes of potential conflict, particularly given the history of limited military engagements. Furthermore, the study examines the role of external powers, such as the US, in shaping the security dynamics within this nuclear triad and the broader South Asian security architecture. The escalating US-China rivalry has hindered constructive initiatives in the region, as strengthened China-Pakistan ties and the growing US-India relationship

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create conflicting interests, threatening regional stability and cooperation.

Keywords

Strategic Security, Nuclear Dyad, NFU, Stability, QUAD, Naval Modernisation.

Introduction

The concept of strategic security refers to the development and implementation of long-term plans and policies that ensure the safety, stability, and security of an organisation, nation, or other entity. Unlike tactical security, which focuses on immediate, short-term protection and defence, strategic security encompasses broader considerations that align with overall goals, resources, and threats in the future. South Asia is already a region burdened with two nuclear dyadic relationships – India and Pakistan and India and China (Chellaney, 2010). India and China emerged in their modern incarnation not much far apart from each other – India in 1947 and China in 1949. Since then, considering their size, their history and civilizational roots, both have aspired for great power status in the region. Efforts to keep the relations between the two peaceful did not last long. Mao's integration of Tibet into the Chinese Territory resulted in Sino- Indian War in 1962. Since then, India, aware of its weaker status compared to China, has irked China through seeking closer relations with great powers like the USA, and erstwhile USSR (Chellaney, 5-15). Indian wooing of other powerful nations has remained a serious factor that has further tainted Sino-Indian relations. After Chinese nuclear tests in 1964 India achieved its own nuclear capability – a struggle that culminated in 1974. Since then, India and China have remained in a state of nuclear competition, constantly assessing activities on the other side in order to calculate their own position in this menacingly dyadic relationship (Tellis, 2022).

On the other hand, one look at the Indo-Pakistani nuclear dyad, the Sino-Indian dyad appears relatively stable. Sino-Indian rivalry is more about power politics than actual war making, unless there are events creating heightened tensions. Same cannot be said about the Indo-Pakistan dyad. They are consistently embroiled in an action-reaction syndrome.

Each measure taken by one side is interpreted as a personal affront by the other side and influenced the interaction dynamics. There is an emotional factor in this relationship which is missing from the Sino-Indian equation. It is like a family feud where the haphazard break-up of the subcontinent is still fresh in the minds of both sides (Tellis, 2022).

Moreover, elites on the Pakistani side worry that Indians have still not zealously accepted the partition of the subcontinent and yearn for its union as a single powerful nation, exerting influence all over the world (Hassan, M. 1990). During the partition, the Muslim-majority state of Jammu and Kashmir, has permanently damaged the relations between the two neighbours. Kashmir is a point of contention that has perpetuated for more than half a century and has kept both India and Pakistan in a de facto war. The relations were further and irretrievably destroyed when Pakistan had to lose its eastern wing in 1971, due to the Indian plotting and deliberate assistance to the Bengali separatists. Both states have engaged in wars four times since the partition – in 1948, 1965, 1971 and 1999. Apart from these wars, there have been multiple crisis that have brought the armed forces on both sides face to face with each other (Tellis, 2022).

The two nuclear dyadic relationships between neighbouring states in the South Asian region has converted the scenario into a single trilateral relationship. Any element of the Sino-Indian dyad has an impact on the Indo-Pakistan dyad and vice-versa. A serious turn of events that has shaken the South Asian trilemma is the US-China global competition in the 21st century. Scholars are observing a shift from unipolarity to multipolarity, where a rising China is emerging as a grave threat for the US global dominance (Bibi et al., n.d.) .

In order to balance against China, US is consistently strengthening its relations with India and insulating it to act as a major actor in the region. India and US have multiple foundational defence agreements in place: General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA); Logistic Support Agreement (LSA); Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA) and the Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement for Geospatial Intelligence (BECA) (Enhancing Strategic Stability in Southern Asia: USIP Senior Study Group Final Report (United States Institute of Peace, 2021). The evolving US and Indian strategic

partnership has naturally pushed China closer to Pakistan. Growing US and Indian cooperation is creating strategic apprehension in Pakistan, which, naturally, is relying more and more on its nuclear deterrent (Bashir, 2022).

The study applies qualitative methods to evaluate the role of these three states in the region, therefore state-level analysis is an approach to understand the role of the state in international politics. As states are the primary determinants in world affairs and their history, behaviour, and attributes need to be analysed deeply to recommend a policy that would be inclusive in nature. The case studies of the three states were analysed under the state level analysis (Ray: 2001).

Moreover, why these states can complicate the regional stability can be answered with the help of state-level analysis. The state-level analysis increases the expected value of the research findings with the help of a detailed study of the states and challenges to be accrued by them due to new geo-political dynamics.

These evolving relationships have created a broader strategic chain, which not only involves India, Pakistan and China, but also the US. India is getting closer to US, which is also visible by its growing prominence in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD). On the other hand, China and Pakistan have not only enhanced their strategic relations but also tightened their economic ties, especially in the context of China's Belt and Road Initiative's (BRI) flagship project of China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). In the midst of this background, the Pulwama crisis of 2019 and the China-India Ladakh crisis in 2020 sent shockwaves in the international community. It heightened tensions of military involved crisis between nuclear-armed rivals. Moreover, on 9th March, 2022, India accidentally fired a BrahMos missile originating from Sirsa, Haryana, that crashed into Mian Channu, Khanewal District of Punjab, Pakistan. It was the first time a nuclear armed nation made an accidental launch onto the territory of its rival. Pakistan's restraint in the situation was appreciated, but it did raise concerns of what future could look like if similar events continue to be repeated (Noor, 2023) .

In the midst of this delicate situation, it is important to note that the Indians claim to be the victim of cross-border terrorism emanating from

Pakistan. In this context, it is important to take note of two doctrines. The first is the Joint Doctrine of the Indian Armed Forces in 2017 and then the second, the Land Warfare Doctrine of 2018. Both doctrines incorporate the prospect of reprisals against Pakistan in the form of surgical strikes, as a retaliatory measure against alleged terrorist activities. Again, considering it is a nuclear dyadic relationship, the perils of such doctrines and their prospective implementation cannot be taken lightly (Noor, 2023)

South Asia is a volatile region, but it is also a region of great significance on the global scene. Since Cold War, US has attempted to act as a mediator to diffuse tensions between India and Pakistan, but the successes in this venture have not been exemplary (Waseem & Sajjad, 2023.). The nuclear triangle in the region has created massive uncertainties for the leaders around the globe. South Asia is an engine of global economic growth and also houses massive portion of the world's population. Any nuclear confrontation in the region has the potential to destabilise global economy and society. The consistent nuclear competition has given the region great international prominence. Strategic competition of the US and China has made implementation of positive initiatives in the region much more difficult. While the China and Pakistan have got consistently closer, US and Pakistan's relationship has been tainted due to growing ties between US and India, and US frustration with Pakistan's alleged sponsorship of terrorism. There are vested interests of major powers in the region's stability. The growing rivalry between the US and China has complicated the execution of constructive initiatives in the region, as the consolidation of China-Pakistan ties and the growing US-India relationship create opposing interests, potentially undermining regional stability and cooperation.

Research Question

How do nuclear capabilities and deterrence strategies of China, India, and Pakistan affect the balance of power and regional security in South Asia?

Strategic Triangulation: Evolving Nuclear Strategies and Contextual History

The chances of bringing peace and security to the region appear bleak. During the Cold War, the nuclear rivals were separated by thousands of miles creating some semblance of crisis stability. South Asia is a region plagued with two nuclear armed dyads, which together have created a nuclear triangle. This nuclear triangle is a complex case of entangled relationships creating constant chain reactions as a result of each event and development. Further destabilising this trilemma is the involvement of US, which is constantly disturbing the tenuous relationships and balance of power in the region. The region is extremely volatile. It is an unsettling example of a nuclear triangle in the age of nuclear weapons (Noor, 2023).

The basic tenets of the concept of deterrence apply on the situations where both sides are nuclear-armed. When only one side is nuclear armed, the other side will be definitely deterred and it does not call for much theoretical contemplation (Harvey & James, 1992a). Most scholars have identified two major types of deterrence: deterrence by punishment and deterrence by denial. Deterrence by denial is exercised through signalling the enemy that it will be denied any objectives that it aims to achieve through launching a nuclear attack. Deterrence by punishment is exercised through making the enemy aware that there will be significant retaliation and unacceptable consequences - usually through destruction of cities and massive civilian casualties - if it launches a first-attack (Kevin P. 2017). The practice of deterrence is as old as the history of human conflict. However, historically, deterrence was practiced only through denial. Nations lacked the capability to inflict total destruction or unacceptable damage on each other (Mohan, 1986). However, the advent of the nuclear weapons has revolutionized the practice of war-making. Before, primary political aim used to be to win the war. During the Cold War, it became to avoid the war. Deterrence has a major role to play in the state of these revolutionized military affairs (Lo, 2003).

Some scholars have also categorized deterrence into the camps of general deterrence and immediate deterrence. General deterrence is the state of affairs between two nuclear armed adversaries, who do not have

any concrete plans to attack each other. Immediate deterrence comes into play in the times of crisis, when both sides have massive fears of pre-emptive strike from the other side, and are desperate to deter it. Undoubtedly, deterrence is practiced extremely differently in these two situations (Harvey & James, 1992b). Moreover, within nuclear deterrence, weapons that have a utility for first-strike are considered bad nukes, while the weapons providing second-strike capability are regarded as good nukes (Mohan, 1986).

The Path to Strategic Security: Critical Elements of Effective Deterrence

There are four major requisites that can assure that deterrence is practiced effectively. First and foremost, it is the physical capacity, or in other words, capability. If a party to the conflict does not have capability to deny or punish, deterrence cannot exist. Second important requisite is credibility or will (Lieber & Press, 2016). Credibility demonstrates that party to the conflict is not making empty threats and its promises to deny or punish are genuine and credible. Third important component to ensure effective execution of deterrence is awareness or communication. Parties to the conflict need to communicate precisely and unambiguously to the adversary their will to deny or punish, if their red lines are crossed (Mohan, 1986).

The last requisite is based on the Rational Actor Model (Mintz, DeRouen 2010). The model assumes that both parties to the conflict will be led by rational and sensible leaders, who will act patiently, reasonably and judiciously in the time of conflict and crisis. Thus, for deterrence to be exercised effectively, it is important that both the parties to conflict are led by rational decision-makers (Mohan, 1986). Moreover, there are two categories of nuclear weapons that the states usually acquire to deter their adversaries. First category of weapons is countervalue weapons. They have the capacity to inflict unacceptable damage through destroying cities and causing massive civilian casualties. Secondly, there are counterforce weapons which can be used to target the enemy's strategic assets and key infrastructure (Snow, 1979).

It is important to understand Thomas Schelling's concept of 'Brinkmanship' in order to understand nuclear deterrence. It has been argued that what is the point of having nuclear weapons to begin with, when states pursue strategic stability, which is nothing less than a promise to not to actually use these weapons. So, when there are weapons on both sides, and no intention to use them, don't they just cancel each other out, taking the situation back to as it was in the beginning of the conflict. Also, possibly, what political motive can be achieved through these weapons; after all, the real purpose of the military is the realisation of the political aims of a nation.

Thomas Schelling addresses these doubts by introducing the concept of brinkmanship into the nuclear deterrence theory. He argues that states do not utilize nuclear weapons by directly threatening their use, but by leaving things to chances and escalating the risks to the level unacceptable to the enemy. In this game of chicken, one party is eventually forced to back down, and the other party is able to achieve its political objectives. A major instance to explain the concept of brinkmanship, hypothetically speaking, is that Cuba might not be worth undertaking a full-fledged nuclear war, but it must be worth creating a 5% risk of it. Thus, through brinkmanship, especially in times of crisis, the utility of nuclear weapons is fully realised in achieving political aims and guaranteeing national security (Powell, 2003).

Regardless of these extraordinary claims, the concept of nuclear deterrence is not revered unanimously and universally. The theory has evolved and materialised after a decades long discourse. Multiple scholars have pointed out its shortcomings, failings and contradictions during the process. For instance, the advocates of peace in the US lament the fact that instead of preventing arms race, the practice of deterrence created massive arms race instabilities in the US-Soviet relationship. Both sides continued to augment their strategic arsenals in order to deter the other side. The scenario throws into doubt the whole assumption that nuclear weapons and their power to deter can actually perpetuate peace in inter-state relations and are capable of creating strategic stability (Mccgwire, 2006).

Scholars have also argued that the concept of deterrence developed during the Cold War cannot be used as a blueprint for understanding all

conflicts. Conflicts differ in their respective characteristics. For instance, Indo-Pak conflict is significantly differently from the Cold War conflict, due to geographical proximity and psychological baggage of Indo-Pak historical relations (Lo, 2003). Another problem identified by scholars and experts on deterrence is the contradiction within 'rational actor model'. For deterrence to work, both sides have to act sensibly and reasonably, and most importantly, patiently. The primary aim would be to avert a nuclear disaster causing an existential threat to their nation. The concept of deterrence conveniently assumes that this will actually be the case on both sides. However, a deeper analysis of the underlying principles demonstrate that rational actor model might not hold in multiple cases, especially in times of crisis. The fog of war, accidents, misperception, domestic pressures, miscommunication and multiple other factors can lead to leaders behaving irrationally. Furthermore, the underlying logic, that all leaders will behave in a way favourable to their people is not a truism. History has proved, that there are rogue leaders, who are not much concerned with the lives of their civilians, and are willing to take extraordinary risks in order to meet their parochial objectives. Thus, there are multiple contradictions within the rational actor model, but it continues to underpin the nuclear deterrence (Sigal, 1979).

Michael MccGwire, in his article on nuclear deterrence, argued that by the 1970s and 80s, the confidence in deterrence was already shaking and it was being questioned. Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD) was upheld in the spirit of balance of numbers and terror. The US establishment adopted the 'Countervailing Strategy' in the 1970s, which aimed at reassuming American nuclear superiority over the Soviets and dominating the Soviets in a war. It challenged the entire ethic of deterrence and demonstrated US officials' disenchantment with the idea of maintaining a balance. In 1983, Strategic Defence Initiative (Star Wars), was launched, which effectively extended the nuclear competition to the realm of space. MccGwire argues that deterrence dogma began to crumble due to some underlying drawbacks. For instance, the theory was inspired by the disciplines of economics and mathematics, rather than politics. It is a major problem as the theory, after all, had to be exercised in the realm of politics. Secondly, there was complete absence of Soviets from the discourse on the nuclear deterrence, which undoubtedly made it sketchy,

partial and imperfect. Lastly, he claimed that the entire edifice of deterrence and stability was based on the imaginations of worst-case scenarios, especially of pre-emption from the other side. The theory and the concept could have been much more cohesive and coherent if it was, instead, based on higher order objectives like establishing cooperative relations with the Soviets (Mccgwire, 2006).

Deterrence with strategic security is nothing more than a delusion. It is founded upon a contradiction, and that is the reason that while purporting to perpetuate peace, it leads to unhalted weapon augmentation and technological advancements in the military affairs of the adversaries. Thus, within the context of deterrence, arms limitation is an elusive utopia, which has never achieved anything concrete. He claimed that the entire SALT process, in the 1970s, was a smokescreen; instead of facilitating genuine arsenal reduction, it sanctioned the arsenal parity at horribly high levels (Mohan, 1986).

The Evolving Challenges of Strategic Security

Apart from the underlying shortcomings and contradictions within the concept of deterrence, there are some emerging challenges to the deterrence orthodoxy in the 21st century. For instance, it was the threat of retaliatory unacceptable damage through countervalue weapons that succeeded in deterring the adversaries in striking first. Technological advancements have led to development of precision-guided counterforce arsenals with high accuracy. Such weapons create the potential for destroying the enemy's strategic assets in a first strike and disarming it from the capability of retaliating with a matching force. This development can, might and will create tendencies in leaders to seriously consider first strikes on their adversaries. This is a potentially dreadful situation where strategic stability might fail miserably. Secondly, as mentioned above, with the acquisition of nuclear weapons by rogue states, the entire concept of rational decision makers being deterred by the risks their actions might create for their nation is thrown into doubt. Thus, nuclear deterrence theory is losing its esteem with 21st century technological advancements and international developments (Snow, 1979).

The theory of nuclear deterrence and the concept of security have the most unnerving and perturbing paradoxical relationship. Since the advent of nuclear weapons, they have emerged and evolved side by side, in direct conflict with each other. One cannot be understood, pursued or envisaged without the other. There have always been some inherent contradictions and shortcomings within the theory and the concept, when it comes to making a case for their relevance in securing international peace. Moreover, in the 21st century, multiple challenges have emerged that have exposed them to criticism, and inspired sentiments for their rethinking and revision. However, these cardinal concepts, that have guided the nuclear journey of the Superpowers in the twentieth century, have not become completely irrelevant in this day and age. Surprisingly, the concept of security and the theory of nuclear deterrence are still intellectually analysed, addressed and scrutinised in the spirit of their historically original lexicon, ideas and debates.

The section has laid down the conceptual foundation of the research through a thorough analysis of the two important concepts that can guide a triangular relationship in the international relations.

Contemporary Debate of Strategic Competition and Emerging Threats

Nuclear weapons are regarded as weapons of defence, rather than offense, these strategic arsenals, with an unprecedented capacity for destruction, create massive challenges due to the prospects of misperceptions, miscalculations, overestimations, or underestimations. Nuclear Weapon States (NWSs) historically have displayed the tendency to engage in nuclear brinkmanship, playing the bluff game, in order to create confusion and insecurities, that can push the adversary into meeting their demands. As a result, regardless of all the No First Use (NFU) and restraint commitments made by the NW-Ss, the possibility of inadvertent escalation in a crisis situation can never be completely eliminated, especially in the scenario where there are shared borders (Waseem & Jamil, 2023). Especially, in an equation of asymmetry, with longstanding disputes or hostilities, as observed between the India/Pakistan and the China/India duads, leaders can be induced to strike first in a threatening situation, in order to deny the adversary, the benefits of a potential war.

Additionally, excessive nuclear deterrence, leading to an unending arms race, creates heightened threat perceptions, where the use of nuclear weapons is at least contemplated as an option.

Since 1998, India's rhetoric and military culture towards Pakistan have increasingly become more hostile. Indian pursuit of escalation dominance over Pakistan is especially concerning. It demonstrates that Indians aim to abandon the restraint approach for a more aggressive strategy. Regrettably, an aggressive strategy in a dyadic nuclear relationship can mushroom the possibility of vertical escalation in an armed conflict. It is understood that Pakistan has a sophisticated conventional and strategic arsenal and it retains the capacity of responding to all levels of aggression. Moreover, increasing Chinese engagement in the regions of Azad Kashmir and Gilgit Baltistan has intensified the triangular entanglements.

The most disturbing element of the India-Pakistan scenario in the region is cross-border terrorism. India, on multiple occasions, especially under the Modi administration, has envisaged and discussed the option of using limited military force against Pakistan, as a response to an alleged terrorist attack. Pakistan is not as conventionally powerful as India, and it relies on its strategic arsenal to balance against Indian conventional superiority. Thus, if India chooses to respond with force in a future scenario, the restraint exercised during the Pulwama crisis cannot always be guaranteed. Chances of vertical escalation are potent.

Indo-Chinese growing economic interdependence did create some optimism regarding the possibility of a peaceful South Asia, in terms of relations between the two. However, recent Ladakh episodes and growing Indian presence in anti-Chinese platforms like the QUAD, have overshadowed this sanguine approach. Moreover, even if the chances of India and China going to war were low, India and Pakistan have been outright hostile towards each other for decades now. It is important to understand that any possibility of a serious war between India and Pakistan has the potential to pull China in and also destabilise the entire region. Thus Indo-Pakistan rivalry is a grave threat to the strategic stability in the region.

The Quad was founded in 2004 but remained dormant for multiple years. However, its revival in the, 2017, ASEAN Summit, demonstrated the concerns of multiple Asia-Pacific and Indo-Pacific countries towards containing China. The major concern of the QUAD members, which unsurprisingly includes India, is the BRI's potential to overturn the balance of power in favour of China in the said regions. The major ports being constructed under the BRI initiative, from Sri Lanka to the South Pacific, are enhancing Chinese maritime power and strategic influence. BRI is considered a demonstration of the Chinese string of pearls strategy, which, India believes, is aimed at encircling it.

India is also taking initiatives to increase its presence in the South China Sea, regardless of the fact that China has made historical claims over it. India is providing military and verbal support to the nations in dispute with China, in the South China Sea. These developments became extremely prominent when Indians offered to provide helicopters to the Philippine Coast Guard (PCG), during the rising tensions between Manila and Beijing. Unfortunately, the US is playing an extremely negative role in this dynamic. It has fumed the Indo-Pakistan and Indo-Chinese rivalry on multiple occasions – for instance, when the Clinton administration shifted their Kashmir policy in a direction more favourable to India. With the goal of containing China in the region, the US is consistently empowering India militarily, economically, diplomatically, and strategically. The biggest blow for the regional strategic security came as the Indo-US nuclear deal, in 2005 (Waseem & Tahirkheli, n.d.). The deal has allowed India to make sizeable strides in the nuclear domain, creating dangerous asymmetries and putting Pakistan at serious peril. The deal has also intensified the arms race between Pakistan and India, and India and China (Waseem & Khan, 2023). In an effort to balance against China, US nonchalance towards the consequences of its actions towards Pakistan's security, and the possible implications of these developments for the strategic security in South Asia is disappointing.

The mistrust between all these nations has heightened, with the Western powers and India forming one bloc, and Pakistan and China forming the other. The nuclear triangular relationship between China, India, and Pakistan becomes complicated and unsettling with each day.

The element of ambiguity revolving around the nuclear doctrines of the three states is certainly ominous. Pakistan has never declared its red lines for nuclear use formally, and it confidently adheres to the possibility of first use. Indian doctrine, notwithstanding a declared NFU policy has created profound ambiguity (which is obviously by design) that would lead to significant strategic security dynamics, including military retaliation, international condemnation, heightened regional tensions, strengthened defence measures, and intensified global efforts for non-proliferation and counterterrorism (Waseem, n.d.). Lastly, China, though overtly supporting disarmament, being a member of NPT, simultaneously maintains that China will build up arms and reinforce its nuclear defence in accordance with the evolving threats in the 21st century. Thus, these ambiguous doctrines, in the context of the complex triangle with entanglements of friendship, competition, and outright hostility, make limited warfare with nuclear overhang an appreciable possibility in the region of South Asia.

Furthermore, the given nuclear triangle has created a perilous challenge for the strategic security in South Asia. Resolution of the Kashmir issue could be a tremendous hope for restrengthening the strategic security in the region – however, that seems unlikely in the near future. Just the fact that there are three nuclear-armed nations that share borders and have overlapping relationships and territorial disputes is daunting in itself. Till these outstanding disputes, threat perceptions, inter-state competition, and hostile rhetoric continue to persist, the strategic security in the region will remain under perpetual threat.

Interestingly, when it comes to Indian naval modernisation and its impact on the strategic security in South Asia, the situation is quite unsettling for the regional and international community. The new US 'Indo-Pacific' strategy has expanded the triangular conflict to the maritime domain, with both geopolitical and geo-economic implications. It should be no surprise that India is at the centre of the US Indo-Pacific strategy. India has aspirations for invincible sea control in the region. India's recent development of naval nuclear capabilities indicates its pursuit of a secure second-strike capability and long-range power projection ambitions. India is pursuing these interests and goals with the goal of strengthening its

deterrence posture against China and also projecting power across the Indian Ocean Region (Waseem, 2023). While it does not impact China's naval nuclear capabilities, it will certainly complicate strategic stability for Pakistan. Pakistan has to focus on finding smart and asymmetric responses to Indian nuclear weapons at sea, that are within Pakistan's resource constraints and can provide Pakistan with the ability to field modest second-strike platforms. Until Pakistan accomplishes these imperative goals, the strategic stability in the region remains in serious peril.

Indian naval development not only seriously undermines the strategic security in the Indo-Pakistan equation, but it also creates novel threats for China in the region. Indian overtures in the IOR have succeeded in placing Pakistan in a precarious situation. If only one of them has an effective second-strike capability, the other one can be left at the mercy of its rival. Moreover, the lack of second-strike capability on the other side can create previously unfathomable pre-emptive and first-strike incentives for India. It is true that India ostensibly asserts an NFU policy, but going back on a promise is not as taxing for the leaders as one would like to assume – especially when an opportunity to serve the national interests of the state arrives.

India now has an assured second-strike capability. The INS Arihant, the flagship Indian nuclear submarine, can remain submerged in the waters for approximately ninety days. Thus, it is an extremely elusive platform, and nearly impossible to destroy with a counterforce strike. The deployment of INS Arihant has created a grave threat to Pakistan and undermined the strategic security in the region. Pakistan has launched its Babur III missile, a submarine-launched cruise missile, which it aims to launch from its class of diesel-electric submarines, yet Pakistan needs to further enhance its technological capabilities and develop a credible second-strike capability, as well as modernise its naval forces, in order to ensure effective deterrence and maintain strategic security in the region.

Nonetheless, groups like QUAD are creating space for India to further advance its naval development, which simultaneously poses a threat to Pakistan and China, however, a much graver one for Pakistan. Indians and the Americans are also collaborating in the strait of Malacca. India is trying to counter the Chinese in the outer sphere of IOR. Moreover,

India is trying to expand its naval influence towards the Middle Eastern region. Naval military modernisation is going to benefit India at the military front, economic front, as well as global front. India is buying, developing, and deploying multiple and diverse platforms like submarines, aircraft carriers, and frigates. These sophisticated platforms also allow India to assert greater control over the key SLOCS. It is crucial to remember that approximately four-fifths of the world's oil and gas shipments and one-third of the bulk cargoes pass through the Indian Ocean.

Moreover, India blatantly asserts the space for surgical strikes on the nations of both Pakistan and China, in response to terrorist threats or attacks. Thus, Pakistan, in order to maintain strategic security in South Asia, must fortify its conventional military architecture. Nuclear response, even of tactical nature, cannot be an appropriate response to a surgical strike. Moreover, the menacing doctrines and alarming policies are magnifying threat perceptions in the region. If continued, this sort of behaviour can succeed in creating a climate of fog, where armed conflict might present itself as the better option. In this context, Pakistan is taking all the necessary measures to maintain strategic security, by upgrading the conventional and strategic forces.

China develops its arsenal in relation to the US nuclear preponderance, but it unnerves Indian leadership, regardless. Indian arms build-up in response to China creates strategic anxieties in Pakistan. Thus, the three nations forming the nuclear triangle are plagued with the action-reaction syndrome, inadvertently undermining the overall strategic security in the region.

The US-India Joint Declaration on Strategic Partnership (2020) deepened bilateral ties, focusing on defence, trade, and regional security. A key aspect was the Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (BECA), which enhanced intelligence-sharing and defence collaboration (U.S. Department of State, 2020). This partnership, driven by shared concerns over China, strengthens India's role in countering Chinese influence in the Indo-Pacific (Kumar & Mishra, 2021).

The US-China competition spans trade, military, technology, and global influence. The trade war (2018) initiated by the US continues to

impact global supply chains (Bown, 2020). Militarily, tensions have risen, particularly in the South China Sea, where the US has increased its naval presence to counter China's growing dominance (Zhao, 2020). Additionally, technological rivalry, especially over 5G and Huawei, remains a key point of conflict (Freeman, 2020). The US also bolstered alliances like the Quad to contain China's influence (Rajagopalan, 2020).

Conclusion

Strategic security remains under stress due to three countries pursuing modernisation of their nuclear forces. China is pursuing its nuclear development and modernisation to address first- and second-strike vulnerabilities perceived by the US. Conversely, the US nuclear forces are configured to respond to both China and Russia. India, on its part, is developing its capabilities with an eye on responding to China and Pakistan. Earlier, India considered Pakistan its primary strategic adversary. As India's threat perception from China has undergone a shift, part of its nuclear capabilities is now directed at China, as well. This complicates Pakistan's calculus, which only considers India its primary strategic adversary. Pakistan has to factor in both qualitative and quantitative additions to India's nuclear forces, despite some of them being arrayed against China, as in times of crisis and war, these forces can be redirected towards Pakistan.

The literature and the commentary on the topic by leading scholars and practitioners in the field confirm that Sino-US strategic competition is intensifying with each day, and India is at the centre of US anti-Chinese policy. Benefitting from this conflict over global hegemony, India has been able to massively expand and advance its military, technological and naval prowess. These developments have created massive security concerns and strategic anxieties for Pakistan. Pakistan-China-India nuclear triangle is extremely complex and menacing. It has expanded to the naval domain and is seriously undermining the strategic security in the region.

The intensifying arms race between India and Pakistan, driven by each nation's response to the other's growing military strength and the broader shifting geopolitical environment, has resulted in an increasingly

unstable security situation. As both countries focus on advancing their military and technological capabilities, especially in the nuclear and naval sectors, the fragile security landscape of the region becomes even more strained. Adding to this complexity, external actors, particularly the United States, have further fuelled the strategic competition by actively working to limit China's growing influence in South Asia. The combined effect of regional rivalries and external pressures has created an environment fraught with the risk of miscalculation, underscoring the need for diplomatic engagement and measured responses to avoid potential conflict. Lastly, US goals and actions in the region have considerably exacerbated the triangular dynamic.

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