

## **Regional Stability and the Asian Nuclear Triplex**

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### **Introduction**

Since India's nuclear tests, followed by Pakistani tests in 1998, Asia has seen the emergence of two nuclear forces besides China, in close geographical proximity. These three states not only share borders, they also have a history of conflicts. Of this nuclear triplex, India, being the second to enter the realm of nuclear weapons capable states, is also the common denominator of having adversarial relations with both Pakistan and China. Besides having territorial disputes with both China and Pakistan, India also has an ambitious foreign policy agenda of maximizing power and influence in the region which exacerbates Pakistan's threat perception. This puts India in a rather peculiar position. Its greater national objectives are entangled in the security environment requiring competition with China and Pakistan, and on the other hand, seeking a stable and friendly relationship with China.

Several unresolved disputes between the two major South-Asian states, Pakistan and India, have not allowed them to develop normal relations. Pakistan being the smaller power in this equation feels threatened by its bigger neighbor. The element of nuclear capabilities has added further complexities to the security environment of the region and nuclear arms competition between India and Pakistan is viewed as an ongoing arms race between them.<sup>1</sup> The Chinese nuclear program however, has reached a plateau according to analysts. Its lower priority to nuclear weapons program can be attributed to its security doctrine which lays greater emphasis on conventional forces for fighting against external aggression, and possession of nuclear weapons are considered only a tool for deterrence.<sup>2</sup>

Against this backdrop, this paper argues that confidence and trust building measures, which may lead to constructive arms control arrangements between the South Asian nuclear rivals hinges on India's willingness to take steps towards achieving this objective. This view is further complemented by India's long standing criticism of the international nuclear order, specifically the Treaty on the Non-proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), as discriminatory.<sup>3</sup> In the absence of faith

in the international nuclear order, the option of bi-lateral and multi-lateral efforts is the only remaining way forward for arms control. Whereby the international norm that responsible nuclear states must actively engage each other in treaties and agreements to promote regional stability and curb an arms race falls in line with this approach.

Pakistan-India strategic relations are more unstable compared to Sino-Indian ties because disparity in conventional arms vis-a-vis India has forced Pakistan to envision a more significant role for its nuclear weapons to deter India from aggression against its territorial integrity. Additionally, China's disregard for nuclear forces as a primary tool of achieving its objectives, allows India the opportunity to undertake initiatives to promote regional stability.

### **Intertwined Motives**

Until the 1960s, though nuclear weapons had been used on Asian soil, none of the Asian states had developed them. In 1964, China carried out its first nuclear test and became the fourth country to have nuclear weapons. China claims to have been motivated by the events of nuclear blackmail during the Korean War and The Taiwan Straits Crises by the United States,<sup>4</sup> and strongly propounded the idea that nuclear weapons acquisition was for the sole purpose of protecting itself against such blackmail in the future. It may be mentioned in this context that prior to the events of implicit nuclear blackmail in the 1950s, China had maintained a strong aversion to the idea of acquiring nuclear weapons. The Chinese leadership had called nuclear weapons as mere paper tigers, having no real utility in international politics. In the pre-nuclear China, Mao Zedong stressed more on the doctrine of the "people's war" or protracted warfare, in the event of ground invasions.<sup>5</sup> Though the efficacy of the nuclear blackmail argument has not been universally accepted,<sup>6</sup> but the Chinese have maintained their policy of strengthening conventional forces over building large nuclear arsenals.

According to the Indian state narrative, the Chinese nuclear test created grave insecurities in India in the backdrop of a recent defeat over a border conflict with China in 1962. India also claims to have been, therefore, compelled to pursue nuclear weapons acquisition for security reasons. It may be interesting to note that India had, at that time, been one of the most vocal champions of global nuclear disarmament.

China however, had the advantage of developing nuclear weapons in a world where safeguards and non-proliferation measures had not yet become universally applicable. The same, however, cannot be said for India which tested its nuclear weapons in 1998<sup>7</sup> after international non-proliferation measures had been put in place. However, the Indian nuclear program pre-dated that of China's. India used the spent fuel from CIRUS reactor<sup>8</sup>—drawing heavy criticism from Canada which was its supplier<sup>9</sup>— to acquire nuclear weapons capabilities, which was covertly tested in the form of Peaceful Nuclear Explosion in 1974.<sup>10</sup> The rationalization for India's decision to go nuclear however, is similar to that of the Chinese—stating security concerns vis-à-vis an antagonistic nuclear armed China. This claim has been contested by academics based on declarations of Homi J. Bhaba, the father of India's nuclear program, in 1958 that India could produce nuclear weapons within eighteen months if the political decision is so made.<sup>11</sup> The technological capabilities to do so at the time may have been debatable, but it is still perceived in some circles as an intent of going nuclear, years before China emerged as a nuclear weapons capable state in 1964.

The third state which completes the Asian nuclear trio, is Pakistan. With a massive conventional force disparity vis-à-vis India in addition to long standing disputes with its eastern neighbor, Pakistan's acquisition of nuclear weapons is rationalized by the same security dilemma that both China and India invoked to justify their respective nuclear weapons program. While Pakistan and China have a more stable and cooperative relationship, the same cannot be said of either of these states' relations with India. The region is, therefore, considered strategically unstable.

Considering the official rationale behind nuclearization of all three of the Indo-Pacific nuclear weapons states, deterrence and security are the foremost objectives of the existence of nuclear weapons in the region. However, the mere acquisition of nuclear weapons capability is not a credible deterrent on its own. Establishing such credibility requires sophisticated delivery means and diverse nuclear weaponry. This creates a paradoxical cycle where the establishment of deterrence is meant to achieve stability between rival states, yet the means of acquiring credibility of the deterrent, leads to further instabilities, resulting in arms race and Low Intensity Conflicts (LIC) under the nuclear over-hang. India's limited war doctrine, initially called "Cold Start Doctrine"<sup>12</sup> (CSD) is seen to have exacerbated the security concerns of Pakistan.<sup>13</sup> Citing the argument of Brig. Khawar Hanif that wider conventional asymmetries lead to the lowering of nuclear thresholds, Sumit Ganguly

and Paul Kapur had speculated an escalatory response from Pakistan as credible deterrence to military adventurism—like CSD or pro-active strategy—on India’s part.<sup>14</sup> Pakistan’s introduction of battlefield nuclear weapons into the fray, by adopting a “Full Spectrum Deterrence” (FSD) posture, is therefore seen as a direct result of the proactive warfighting rhetoric.<sup>15</sup>

Consideration of these factors call for the adoption of prudent measures in addressing insecurities of other states while ensuring security of one’s own state. Arms control, in this situation would also amount to capping excessive military growth in reaction to an adversary’s developing forces. However, entering into arms control agreements requires a minimum amount of trust and inter-dependence between states which, in this case is seen between China and India, owing to their economic ties despite having conflicts in other areas. The same cannot be said for India and Pakistan; a relationship that suffers from great trust deficit, owing in part to their adversarial history and more recently to the shift in India’s Pakistan policy under the Modi administration.

### **Factors of Instability between India and Pakistan**

There is a great conventional force disparity between India and Pakistan which makes the weaker state, Pakistan, feel threatened by its bigger adversary. Statements from Indian foreign ministry dictating rules for diplomatic engagement are seen in Pakistan as India’s attempt at establishing its hegemony over the less powerful state.<sup>16</sup>

Pakistan has not increased its conventional force strength significantly since 1998. The pre-nuclearization disparity between India and Pakistan’s conventional forces which was recorded at 1.1 million and 0.5 million respectively, have risen slightly since the overt declaration of nuclear capabilities by both states, leaving Pakistan’s figures of active military force at 0.64 million and India’s at 1.32 million.<sup>17</sup> However, the growth ratio in nuclear weapons [See: Table] of both states has remained constant. It is pertinent to note that the given figures only show the total estimated number of warheads in possession of each. Further details regarding the number of strategic and sub-strategic warheads in possession of each state are not available. However, it can be surmised that Pakistan’s growth trajectory in the recent years may have been driven by the need for operationalizing Full-Spectrum Deterrence (FSD). These figures however, indicate that Pakistan is not adding strategic nuclear

weapons at an alarming pace as suggested in certain reports. In fact, its nuclear arsenal has grown only in proportion to that of India's.

**Number of Nuclear Weapons**

Year	2010	2012	2014
India	60-80	80-100	90-110
Pakistan	70-90	90-110	100-120

Based on information from SIPRI Yearbook 2010-2014<sup>18</sup>

Arms control theories were developed in the context of Cold War and realization of the devastation that Mutually Assured Destruction may cause, and acknowledging the futility of having excessive nuclear arsenals. This condition led to the establishment of what we know as Deterrence Stability, where the costs of engaging in armed conflict and risking escalation, are far greater than any potential benefit. With respect to India and Pakistan, this is not the case. The entanglement of regional instability with territorial disputes is a serious cause for concern.

Both these countries share a number of claims to disputed territory which has been the cause of unabated animosity between the two states. The three most prominent disputes are Siachen, Sir Creek and over Jammu & Kashmir state. While the issues of Sir Creek and Siachen are both subject to different interpretations of the Radcliffe Award, Kashmir is a different issue altogether with significantly deeper relevance to the fate of the Kashmiri people. The issue concerns three main parties, the Government of India, Government of Pakistan, and most importantly, the Kashmiri populace. India has historically blocked any attempts at mediation by external actors over issues of bilateral concern. While such a position could be respected in good faith on other occasions, it does not apply to the Kashmir issue. India propounds primacy of territorial claims under the Radcliffe Award, whereas Pakistan's insistence is on consideration of the wishes of the Kashmiri people, which falls in line with the United Nations' stance on the issue, favouring a plebiscite to be held to settle the dispute. Each state stands by its respective positions that would strengthen its claim over the disputed state. There is also considerable national sentiment attached to the former princely state of Kashmir, on both sides of the LoC.

The Kashmir issue has historically been the cause for wars and military conflicts between the two nuclear armed rivals and is widely considered the most dangerous

potential nuclear flashpoint of our times. The matter is simultaneously sensitive and complex and demands a political solution in order to restore stability to India-Pakistan relations. The presence of nuclear weapons in the mix demands a more robust political approach towards its resolution. Lack of political will and refusal on India's part to even discuss the matter, however, has not only put off the discussion of a core cause of enmity with Pakistan but has perpetuated the suffering of Kashmiris in the form of extra-judicial executions and detentions in an increasingly hostile living environment.

### **History and Prospects for Arms Control**

As mentioned above, arms control theories mostly originated and evolved during the Cold War. Bilateral agreements were then initiated in an attempt to retard the over-kill capabilities that the two superpowers had amassed. However, the idea eventually gave way to treaties of a more global scope, like the NPT in 1968.<sup>19</sup> The NPT has been the subject of much debate in South Asia, as it gives P5<sup>20</sup> countries exclusive claim over legitimate nuclear-weapons-state status and bars countries like India and Pakistan, from getting *de jure* nuclear status. Although both India and Pakistan gained nuclear weapons capability decades after the NPT had entered into force in 1970<sup>21</sup> and neither of these two countries were party to the treaty, their status is that of *de facto* nuclear weapons states. The states party to the NPT have been exerting sustained pressure on these states to sign the treaty. India and Pakistan however, are reluctant to sign the NPT as doing so would deny them *de jure* nuclear weapon state status permanently. This is unacceptable to both Pakistan and India. Other than the NPT, India and Pakistan seem to be at an impasse over entering into treaties like the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT). India cites disagreements with the discriminatory nature of the treaties and Pakistan refuses to sign it if India does not.

As India refuses to sign CTBT, Pakistan wants to keep its options open in the wake of Indian refusal and thus, is also not prepared to unilaterally sign it. Pakistan has over time, repeated its endorsement of the spirit of the CTBT but cites security concerns as its main cause of reluctance to signing it. However, it has been stated categorically that Pakistan will not be the first to resume nuclear testing in the region, just as it was not the first to initiate them. Pakistan's permanent representative at the CD said in a statement at the 66<sup>th</sup> session of the United Nations General Assembly, that the CD can progress on consensus alone and that consensus had not been reached for

the past 15 years was a testament to the fact that not all states' concerns had yet been addressed.<sup>22</sup> He was alluding to the matter of CTBT and India's refusal to sign which has locked Pakistan out of the treaty as well owing to security concerns. This view has been endorsed by prominent academics going to the extent of terming the possibility of Pakistan being the first of the two South-Asian nuclear weapons states to sign the treaty, as nothing short of "suicidal".<sup>23</sup>

Moreover, differences on the approach to the Fissile Material Cut-off Treaty (FMCT) at the Conference on Disarmament (CD) is currently hindering the fruition of negotiations on the nature of the treaty. Pakistan strongly opposes the furthering of negotiations towards drafting a treaty due to disagreements on the scope of the FMCT. The primary reason for Pakistan's opposition is the emphasis on the "cut-off" of further production of fissile materials without addressing the issue of existing stockpiles. According to Pakistan, entering into the treaty without taking into account existing fissile material stockpiles would place it in a disadvantageous position vis-à-vis India, permanently.<sup>24</sup> Pakistan's representative to the Conference on Disarmament, Ambassador Zamir Akram reiterated Pakistan's position on the treaty in a plenary meeting held in June 2015, in the following words:

Pakistan is opposed to the commencement of negotiations on a treaty that only bans the future production of fissile material without addressing the asymmetries in fissile material holdings between states. A treaty that does not cover past production, that is, the existing stockpiles of fissile materials, would be detrimental to Pakistan's security and regional stability in South Asia, as it would freeze and perpetuate the asymmetry in stocks to Pakistan's permanent strategic disadvantage.<sup>25</sup>

Looking at China's role in the arms control and disarmament movements, though not exceptional, it is still relatively more positive than that of India and Pakistan. China has signed the CTBT along with a number of other significant treaties establishing its commitment to arms control and disarmament.<sup>26</sup> China's commitment to the cause of arms control and disarmament was thoroughly expounded in a white paper released by the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 2005 which lists the treaties and agreements that the PRC is party to along with details on national policies regarding these issues.<sup>27</sup> The document also contains measures for promoting peaceful ties with India based on the protocol between India and China on "Modalities for the Implementation of Confidence-Building Measures in the Military Field along the Line

of Actual Control in the China-India Border Areas”.<sup>28</sup> Moreover, the role of nuclear weapons in China’s military thinking has remained less significant by no coincidence as the country has always maintained that the utility of nuclear weapons does not go beyond having a psychological effect and, has remained shy of engaging in nuclear arms race throughout its history.<sup>29</sup> This aspect of China’s nuclear policy can be seen as a source of consolation in that it would relieve much tension from India in countering or competing with Chinese forces in the nuclear arena. India, therefore, does not suffer from insecurities vis-à-vis China at the same level that Pakistan does with respect to India.

China’s aversion to building nuclear stockpiles notwithstanding, India continues to present a perceived Chinese threat as justification for qualitative and quantitative improvements to its nuclear arsenal. This increases insecurities for Pakistan, locking the two into a nuclear arms competition. India’s claim that changes in nuclear force are China-centric is not supported by its posture on the conventional side, which is directed against Pakistan. As mentioned above, China has historically preferred conventional military strength over nuclear superiority and, that its competitive behaviour is most prominent in geo-economics. This leaves greater freedom for India to initiate measures to curb the arms race in the region. Comparatively, Pakistan has less chances to effectively do the same considering its national security imperatives and its security concerns with respect to India. Therefore, by taking advantage of Chinese aversion to placing greater emphasis on nuclear weapons in its defence policy and posture, India can effectively reduce the growing insecurities between itself and Pakistan, by practising restraint and reconciling its posture with state narrative.

### **India’s Centrality to Stability**

On the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the end of the Second World War, Beijing organized a grand parade on September 3<sup>rd</sup> 2015, where the Chinese president Xi Jinping announced reduction in the Chinese military forces by 300,000.<sup>30</sup> This is a unilateral move in line with China’s commitment to regional stability and preference for economic development over military superiority.<sup>31</sup> China has, in this manner, set a precedent where national strength is demonstrated not by displaying military superiority, but by practicing restraint which can only come from a sense of confidence in a state’s ability to defend itself.

India thus, is in the middle of adversaries with vastly differing sense of security. Where on the one hand, China has grown increasingly secure to the extent of announcing unilateral reductions in its conventional forces, Pakistan's security remains under threat vis-à-vis growing Indian power. With easing of China's posture, there is greater space for India to take the initiative for strengthening stability in South-Asia. Indian and Pakistani nuclear weapons and missile programs are moving at a swift pace with an estimated capability to make five and nine plutonium based weapons per year respectively.<sup>32</sup> The two countries are locked in a competition that has added to the instability in the region, and caused unease among disarmament and arms control lobbies in the world. India being a bigger power, particularly in view of reduction in Chinese threat to its security, is in a unique position to take policy decisions that would contribute to the promotion of stability in the region. The steps it can take are announcing a moratorium on production of nuclear weapons and development of its missile program. Furthermore, it should announce its willingness to sign the CTBT. These steps by India will show the world that it has become a confident and secure power with respect to its adversaries in addition to putting pressure on Pakistan to follow suit, resulting in easing of tension between the two neighbors and strategic stability in South Asia.

India stands to gain great benefit and international praise for showing restraint in a manner similar to that of China's. Indian ambitions for greater recognition in the world would also gain favor by display of responsible state behavior as opposed to worsening ties with an already insecure, weaker adversary, armed with nuclear weapons.

### **Conclusion**

The Asian nuclear triplex, consisting of Pakistan, India and China is a complicated mix due to the primary fact that borders are shared by states with adversarial relations and long standing territorial and political disputes. The situation is further aggravated due to conventional capabilities of the two stronger states, India and China. Though the nuclear assets possessed by all these three states combined cannot match those of the Cold War rivals, it is still a worrisome situation. Relations between China and India are relatively stable now and are likely to remain so in the near future with China's interest in expanding nuclear weapons capabilities at a lower priority than conventional armaments. This situation, allows room for India to

alleviate the security concerns of its western neighbor by taking the role of initiator and stabilizer of relations with Pakistan.

India not only has the advantage of greater security over Pakistan due to conventional superiority, but also boasts of being the largest democracy in the world. Pakistan on the other hand having faced political turmoil throughout its existence along with the internal threat of terrorism, is reliant on its nuclear capabilities to offset conventional disparity while being engaged in massive counter-terrorism operations within its borders. India has all the makings of a rising power in the statistical sense but has yet to exhibit behavior becoming of a power that can realize its true potential. China stands as an example to be emulated in this regard. By normalizing ties with Pakistan and engaging in arms control initiatives in the region, India would be alleviating tensions in the region in a way that no other state can do.

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## **Endnotes**

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<sup>5</sup> Baylis, John, et al. "Chinese Defence Policy." In *Contemporary Strategy*, 132, 133. 2nd ed. Vol. II. New York: Holmes & Meier, 1987.

<sup>6</sup> Betts, Richard K. *Nuclear Blackmail and Nuclear Balance*. Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1987. 44.

<sup>7</sup> "1998: India Explodes Nuclear Controversy." BBC News. May 11, 1998. Accessed June 24, 2015. [http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/may/11/newsid\\_3664000/3664259.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/may/11/newsid_3664000/3664259.stm).

<sup>8</sup> Salik, Naeem. *The Genesis of South Asian Nuclear Deterrence: Pakistan's Perspective*. Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2009. 28.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. 33.

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- <sup>15</sup> "Full Spectrum Deterrence: Pakistan Test-fires Nasr Missile." *The Express Tribune*. September 27, 2014. Accessed June 23, 2015. <http://tribune.com.pk/story/767860/full-spectrum-deterrence-pakistan-test-fires-nasr-missile/>.
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- <sup>18</sup> "16 June 2014: Nuclear Forces Reduced While Modernizations Continue, Says SIPRI." SIPRI. January 1, 2014. Accessed June 2, 2015. [http://www.sipri.org/media/pressreleases/2014/nuclear\\_May\\_2014](http://www.sipri.org/media/pressreleases/2014/nuclear_May_2014).
- <sup>19</sup> "Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT)." International Atomic Energy Commission. Accessed June 30, 2015. <https://www.iaea.org/publications/documents/treaties/npt>.
- <sup>20</sup> The P5 are five countries with legitimate nuclear-weapons-state status awarded by the NPT. Though a number of states have acquired nuclear weapons capability since the existing 5 at the time the NPT was adopted, the P5 are given exclusive legitimacy which is denied to states that acquired nuclear weapons after 1968. They are the permanent members with veto power, at the UN Security Council. Their permanent status is where the term "P5" gets its origin. These are: Russia, The United States of America, The United Kingdom, France and China.
- <sup>21</sup> "Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT)."
- <sup>22</sup> Statement by Ambassador Zamir Akram Permanent Representative of Pakistan to the Conference on Disarmament at the First Committee Thematic Debate on Disarmament Machinery (66th Session of the UNGA) (New York, 24 October 2011). Accessed September 6, 2015. [http://www.pakun.org/statements/First\\_Committee/2011/10242011-01.php](http://www.pakun.org/statements/First_Committee/2011/10242011-01.php)
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<sup>29</sup> Baylis, John, et al. "Chinese Defence Policy." 132, 135.

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<sup>31</sup> ibid

<sup>32</sup> Estimates derived based on 5kt plutonium-based weapons from listed production capacities of Khushab Reactor Complex (Pakistan) and CIRUS and DHRUVA plutonium reactors (India). See:

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