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Strategic Stability in South Asia

Challenges and Prospects

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Preamble

India and Pakistan have a seven decades long history of hostile and acrimonious relations interspersed with three major wars and some serious border skirmishes within the first 25 years of their existence as sovereign states. Since 1971, however, there has been no major war between the two neighbours, though the uneasy peace between them has been dotted with some serious crises and a major clash of arms across the Line of Control in the Kargil area of Jammu and Kashmir, in 1999. It was hoped, that after the overt nuclearisation of the two South Asian antagonists, a period of relative calm and stability would ensue in the region. However, strategic stability in South Asia has remained elusive and in recent years with the breakdown of the ‘Composite Dialogue’ process and growing frequency and intensity of firing incidents across the Line of Control as well as the Working Boundary, new challenges to strategic stability have emerged. The tendency, on part of the Indian media as well as some political elements in India, to term any terrorist incident happening on Indian soil as “Cross-border Terrorism”, and accusing Pakistani establishment of complicity, without even waiting for the outcome of their own official investigations, has repeatedly derailed on-going efforts aimed at reconciliation between India and Pakistan.

These trends even after the passage of over a decade and a half since India and Pakistan conducted tit-for-tat nuclear tests in May 1998 are disturbing to say the least. It was not unrealistic to expect that the two South Asian neighbours would curb their tendencies for sabre rattling and brinkmanship, and develop institutionalised mechanisms for crisis management and implement appropriate confidence building measures (CBMs), to stabilise their security relationship. Unfortunately, such hopes have not yet been realised, tensions run high, and the regional stability remains fragile. The Composite Dialogue initiated in 2004, with a lot of promise, has not yielded much, except some useful CBMs. The dialogue was unfortunately disrupted after the Mumbai terrorist attacks in November 2008, and several efforts to breathe fresh life into it have so far failed to materialise.

Undoubtedly, there are elements on both sides which would not like to see peace and amity between the two countries and in the recent past, non-state actors and violent groups have, on several occasions, precipitated incidents that brought the two South Asian neighbours to the brink of war. The recent unprecedented stopover at Lahore by the Indian Prime Minister, though high on optics rather than substance, had raised hopes of resumption of the long-stalled dialogue and improvement in bilateral relations between India and Pakistan.¹ The visit itself followed a series of positive engagements including the exchange of pleasantries between the two Prime Ministers on the sidelines of the Climate Summit at Paris, the meeting at Bangkok between the respective National Security Advisors,² the signing of the TAPI (Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, India gas pipeline) agreement,³ and visit to Islamabad by Indian External Affairs Minister to attend the Heart of Asia meeting.⁴ The Indian Prime Ministers's Lahore visit had created the kind of positive atmosphere that was needed for the resumption of Foreign Secretary level talks scheduled for mid-January 2016. However, a terrorist attack at an Indian airbase a little over a week after the visit has played straight into the hands of hostile Indian media and the political opposition that had already been critical of Prime Minister Modi's initiative. Pakistan, on its part, has not only condemned the incident, but has also offered cooperation to India. One would only hope that sagacity would prevail and the Foreign Secretaries talks would be rescheduled but not called off. With 'peace and security' being one of the ten core issues of the 'Comprehensive Bilateral Dialogue', a stalled dialogue process between the two nuclear armed states would have an adverse impact on strategic stability in South Asia. Before discussing the specifics of Strategic Stability in South Asia, it would be pertinent here to provide a brief overview of the concept of strategic stability itself.

Strategic Stability – The Conceptual Underpinnings

'Strategic Stability' has been defined by Paul Stockton as a, "situation between adversaries, in which they are unlikely to fight a strategic war, involving attacks against industry, population, or strategic military forces."⁵ This definition is however, too broad and ambiguous, as it appears to have been designed to describe the

antagonistic relationship between the two super powers during the Cold War years. It also seems to imply, that it is more pertinent to explain the relationship between two nuclear armed adversaries, and leaves out the situations where none of the adversaries is armed with nuclear weapons, or only one of the adversaries may be in possession of nuclear weapons. Nevertheless, this particular concept of strategic stability can be usefully applied to the South Asian region, where both the antagonists are nuclear armed states. Other analysts have defined the term according to their own respective perceptions wherein some have employed a philosophical approach, while others have employed Game Theoretical models. Strategic stability has also been described in terms of its technical (related to configuration of forces), and political dimensions. According to Richard K. Betts, though less attention is paid to the political dimension, it is more important since “it governs incentives to change the status-quo.”⁶

The concept of strategic stability has a close linkage with deterrence theory, and according to Michael Mandelbaum, “it consists of a set of practices and assumptions, by which, the terrifying weapons of mass destruction created by twentieth century science have been absorbed into the age old game of international politics.”⁷ ... Chinese experts have also extolled the positive virtues of strategic stability arguing that, “Strategic stability contributed in a significant way to the maintenance of peace in general and the curbing of nuclear war in particular. Large scale conventional war between the two major powers or between NATO and Warsaw Pact did not take place due to the fear of such a war being escalated into a nuclear exchange. ...”⁸ According to a former commander of India’s strategic forces, strategic stability is, “a robust strategic nuclear balance that is maintained over a long period of time despite the impact of destabilising factors.”⁹

Thomas Schelling and Morten Halperin have defined strategic stability as a situation where the probability of war is minimal because neither side sees any advantage in striking first and their respective calculations are insulated from upsets, fears and trepidations. In essence, strategic stability reduces incentives for a first strike, provides assurance of a second strike and rules out

situations where either side will be compelled to act hastily on the basis of incomplete or unverified information or to prematurely move or deploy its forces in a way that might be viewed as provocative by the other.¹⁰

Threats to Strategic Stability

Paul Stockton and many other experts have identified three main threats to strategic stability,¹¹ which can be usefully employed as a framework, to explain to a large extent the South Asian strategic environment as well. However, South Asia has its own peculiarities which would be described later. The three commonly recognised threats to strategic stability are as under:-

- ***Crisis Instabilities***

‘Crisis instabilities’ also termed as ‘first strike instabilities’, occur when both the antagonists believe that the outcome of the conflict can be improved in large measure by resorting to a first strike, rather than riding out an enemy strike and then responding in a retaliatory mode. In such a situation, they are more likely to launch a strike, in the event of a serious crisis. However, their actions will be determined by the degree of advantage they could gain through a first strike, and the imminence of war. Thomas Schelling also supports this view, and points out that, “even modest advantages of striking first, could fuel reciprocal fears of attack, and dangerously heighten the apparent probability of a war during a crisis.” Elbridge Colby believes that, “a situation would be stable when both parties would see that massively launching first – whether to avoid being neutered or to try to disarm one’s opponent – would be either unnecessary or foolish,”¹² and points out that, “the search for first strike stability therefore led to a focus on increasing the survivability of both US and Soviet forces and command and control systems.”¹³

In the South Asian context, crisis instability or first strike stability is not a serious issue at least for the present and the

near term future, since both India and Pakistan are believed to follow recessed nuclear postures with a geographical separation between the warheads and delivery systems which also mitigates to a large extent the possibilities of an accidental, unintended or a premature strike based on false or misinterpreted information. As of now, neither side possesses real time target acquisition and surveillance capabilities, which again limit their ability to carry out an effective first strike. The operationalisation of India's nuclear powered submarines equipped with nuclear tipped Submarine Launched Ballistic Missiles (SLBMs), which will surely be followed by Pakistan in due course, will certainly pose serious challenges to their current policies of assertive centralised control over their nuclear forces. Though some analysts¹⁴ believe that the introduction of the maritime legs of the respective nuclear triads would extend the nuclear competition between India and Pakistan into a new domain with serious ramifications, this development would in actual fact, lead to first strike stability by providing the two sides with assured second strike capabilities.

- ***Arms Race Instabilities***

Barry Buzan has defined arms racing as, “a self-stimulating military rivalry between states, in which, their efforts to defend themselves militarily, cause them to enhance the threats they pose to each other.”¹⁵ This phenomenon is also sometimes described as ‘mirror imaging’. According to Huntington, it is, “a progressive, competitive, peacetime increase in armaments by two states or coalition of states, resulting from conflicting purpose or mutual fears.”¹⁶ Colin Gray, on the other hand, has explained it as, “two or more parties perceiving themselves to be in an adversary relationship, who are increasing or improving their armaments at a rapid rate and structuring their respective military postures with a general attention to the past, current and anticipated military and political behaviour of other parties”.¹⁷ Albert Wohlstetter, however, does not subscribe to the notion of an arms race. He argues, that there was

surely a military competition between the two super powers, but it is not appropriate to characterise it as an arms race.¹⁸ Arms races themselves are governed by the following models:-

- *Action-Reaction Model:* This model implies that, states increase their armaments quantitatively as well as qualitatively, because of the perceived threats from other states. This would mean that the factors affecting the arms dynamic are mainly extraneous. In South Asia, the India-Pakistan relationship has historically been dominated by action-reaction syndrome, manifesting itself most visibly in the nuclear and missile competition.
- *Domestic Structure Model:* In this model, the underlying idea is that, the impetus for an arms competition is generated by the internal factors as opposed to the external factors. It is also described as the bureaucratic model. This model has a more profound effect, in democratic systems of government, as compared to the autocratic systems. Various players, who influence the decision makers in this model, are corporate interests of the research and development organisations, inter-services rivalry and domestic politics.
- *Technological Imperative Model:* There is a widely held view that technological imperative has been the single most important factor in driving the arms race, and especially the nuclear arms race. For instance, Gwyn Prins argues that, “since 1945, the growing sophistication of weaponry and research technology, has given rise to a view of the arms race, which attributes its course and pace to the ‘pull’ of technological advance rather than ‘push’ of political initiative.”¹⁹ Since research and development in nuclear and missile technology in India and Pakistan is restricted to the state-run entities, there is no

classic military industrial complex lobbying for the development and induction of their products and technologies, as is the case in the United States. However, in recent years, scientific community and strategic research and development organisations have grown in stature and influence. As the research and development produces new weapon systems, there is an inexorable momentum to test and induct them. This is going to be a critical factor in fuelling the nuclear missile arms race in South Asia as the technological capabilities of the scientific communities in the two countries grows overtime.

Arms race instabilities arise when states perceive the need to compete with their rivals in making quantitative and qualitative force improvements. However, all force improvements are not driven primarily by such perceived requirements. As explained earlier, factors such as domestic political pressures, bureaucratic rivalries and technological imperatives also play a significant part. Though each of the adversary's attempts to undertake weapons development programmes in response to their respective estimates of the happenings on the other side of the fence, these assessments often prove erroneous or exaggerated, as was the case of US intelligence estimates in the 1950s and early 1960s, which suggested substantial bomber and missile gaps vis-à-vis the Soviet Union. Though this particular 'security dilemma'²⁰ has been experienced amongst rival powers in various regions of the world, the South Asian security environment has an additional complication which arises out of the peculiar geometry of the conflictual relationships in the region. The triad of security linkages between India, China and Pakistan has, within it, two dyads of hostile relationships between India and Pakistan on the one hand, and India and China on the other. The triad itself has exterior tentacles such as the Sino-US security competition. This gives rise to a situation that has been termed as a security '*tri-lemma*'²¹ as opposed to the traditional concept of the security dilemma.

The security tri-lemma has been identified as a peculiar characteristic of what the experts call the ‘Second Nuclear Age’.²² In the second nuclear age, devoid of any organising security structure like the Cold War era, many of the nuclear powers including the new entrants such as India and Pakistan face multiple threats which give rise to the ‘security tri-lemma’. In such an environment, efforts by one state to augment its defences against another state are viewed as threatening to its security by a third state, which in turn, takes countermeasures to mitigate its concerns thus causing further insecurities for its adversary. In this regard, the China, India, and Pakistan security relationship is a case in point, wherein, China might take certain steps to safeguard its security vis-a-vis the United States which might have a cascading effect within the Sino-Indo-Pak security triangle by making India feel insecure. However, the Indian response to the perceived Chinese threat would in turn cause anxiety in Pakistan, which would then act to redress the imbalance caused by Indian actions. A somewhat similar security triangle existed between the US, China and the erstwhile Soviet Union during the 1960s and early 1970s, though the power differential and nature of problems between those states were very different from the South Asian environment. In any case, such a complicated security matrix makes it difficult to conceive and build bilateral stability regimes within any dyadic security relationship because these restraints will not apply to the third state within the triangular security structure.

- ***Escalatory Dangers***

In a conflict between two nuclear armed adversaries, even if initially fought with conventional weapons, there is always a possibility of escalation to the strategic level conflict, involving the use of nuclear weapons. This escalation may not be advertent or pre-meditated, but there is always a danger of inadvertent escalation, which can be caused, by any of the following possibilities. Firstly, it could

be caused by misreading and misperception of the intentions of the adversary. Secondly, the possibility of an accidental escalation would always be there. This could result from damage to, or destruction of a component of the adversary's nuclear forces such as a ballistic missile submarine, a nuclear capable aircraft, or a land-based missile during the conduct of conventional tactical operations. Thirdly, it could be caused by false warning of an imminent or actual first strike by the enemy, especially in situations where retaliatory second strike capability is less than assured.

In the South Asian context, India has been propounding a limited war doctrine since early 2000, arguing that, there is a space for a limited conventional war even under the nuclear overhang. This line of thinking is fraught with dangers, because the possibility of inadvertently damaging or destroying a Pakistani nuclear weapon or delivery system cannot be ruled out, especially during the conduct of attacks against air bases. Moreover, India's adoption of a 'Proactive Operations Doctrine' commonly known as the 'Cold Start Doctrine' once fully operationalised would create the perpetual fear of a surprise attack. Pakistan, on its part, has responded to this provocative doctrine by introducing short-range battlefield nuclear weapons. In this backdrop, any miscalculation or misinterpretation of intentions during the course of a serious future crisis could lead to an escalation of the conflict to a strategic level.

Additional Challenges to Strategic Stability

Experts have identified the emergence of security tri-lemmas amongst nuclear weapon states as a serious and perpetual challenge to strategic stability. The development of advanced conventional weapons with precision strike capabilities including the hypersonic missiles and Global Prompt Strike Systems with a potential to strike and destroy strategic weapon systems of the adversary are highly destabilising. Since these provide the possessor of such systems the ability to launch a first strike against the adversary's strategic forces without using the nuclear weapons. In South Asia, because of

Pakistan's peculiar geographic limitations, the danger of an intentional or inadvertent targeting and damage/destruction to a portion of Pakistan's strategic assets cannot be ruled out. Precisely for this reason India's professed desire to seek a space for a limited conventional war while staying below the nuclear threshold carries dangerous omens.

India has also been pursuing a missile defence capability since the 1990s, ostensibly to neutralise Pakistan's ballistic missile capability. It has only led Pakistan to invest more resources in the development of cruise missiles capability. Ballistic missile defences are also destabilising because they encourage first strike tendencies. They will also cause arms race instability by compelling Pakistan to make qualitative as well as quantitative improvements in its missiles arsenal to offset the impact of ballistic missile defences.

Cyber warfare is also fast emerging as a menace to strategic stability because it poses a serious threat to the nuclear command and control systems and can cause decapitation without using any nuclear or conventional weapons. Cyber warfare could also cause confusion by interfering with the early warning systems, causing false alarms and damaging communication systems. The potential threat of virtual decapitation of nuclear command and control could lead the top decision makers to use their nuclear weapons preemptively or delegate command authority to lower levels of command with heightened risks of unauthorised, accidental or unintended firing of nuclear weapons. More ominously, due to difficulties in attribution, cyber warfare can be employed by third parties including non-state actors to cause escalation of a conflict between two contending parties. In the absence of any international regime to impose restrictions or outlaw cyber warfare, especially against nuclear command and control systems and other nuclear facilities, this will continue to pose a very serious challenge to strategic stability though its destructive potential is yet to be fully recognised.

The Current State of Strategic Stability in South Asia

The current state of strategic stability in South Asia is tenuous at

best with several factors contributing to undermine it further. The 'Composite Dialogue' process which began in 2004 on a promising note and was making slow, but steady, progress until the Mumbai incident in November 2008 has been frozen in its tracks since then.²³ The growing strategic relationship between India and the United States epitomised by the US-India Civil Nuclear Agreement,

President Obama's two state visits to India, during which he reiterated United States' commitment to facilitate India's entry into the Security Council and the export controls regime through country-specific exceptions, have had a deleterious effect on the India-Pakistan equation, by reducing India's incentives to deal equitably with Pakistan. Afghanistan continues to cast a dark shadow over South Asia where India is trying to create a niche for itself at the cost of Pakistan's legitimate security interests in an already unstable political and security environment. The regional security situation has further deteriorated due to aggressive posturing by the current Indian leadership and their proclivity to avoid any meaningful and serious dialogue with Pakistan aimed at resolution of outstanding disputes. Unfortunately, relations with Pakistan have also become a part of electoral politics in India and a belligerent posture towards Pakistan as part of the election rhetoric has proven to be a winning formula for the ruling BJP in the recent past. Given the long drawn out state and federal electoral process in India, this factor alone ensures perpetuation of anti-Pakistan sentiment in the Indian polity. Reckless statements aimed mainly at the domestic audience are also frequently made by prominent political players in India. A case in point is the threats by key Indian Ministers to launch similar (mis)adventures in Pakistan in the aftermath of a raid by Indian special-forces inside Myanmar in utter disregard to the vastly different power equations between India-Myanmar on the one hand, and India-Pakistan on the other.

India has been continuously challenging the credibility of Pakistan's nuclear deterrent at various planes. At the doctrinal level, it has sought to seek space for limited conventional operations by adopting Proactive Operations/Cold Start Doctrine²⁴ and has been actively practising these precepts in major war games. At the technical level, it is actively pursuing its ballistic missile defence

programme to counter Pakistan's ballistic missile delivery systems. It has entered into agreement with Russia to acquire advanced air defence systems and is conducting sea trials of its nuclear powered submarine and associated submarine launched ballistic missiles. On the politico-diplomatic front it has hardened its positions on various bilateral issues and wants to dictate its terms vis-a-vis the agenda and the outcome of negotiations with Pakistan. The Modi government has not only increased both the frequency and intensity of exchange of fire across the Line of Control (LoC), but has expanded the clashes to the Working Boundary in Sialkot-Jammu sector thus posing a challenge to Pakistan's conventional deterrence as well.

Pakistan on its part has responded to these challenges by introducing short-range battlefield nuclear weapons to plug the gaps being sought by India in conventional defences. It has also been working to develop its own maritime deterrence capability, and has been investing resources and effort to refine its cruise missiles capability. It has also been trying to engage India into a sustained and result-oriented dialogue. Given the long drawn out commitment of a substantial portion of Pakistani military in counter-terrorism operations along the Western border and the concomitant thinning of forces along the eastern border, Pakistan will feel stressed if India persists with hostile activities along the Line of Control and the Working Boundary. India's ever increasing defence budget and a large scale force modernisation programme will further disturb the conventional equilibrium and thus forcing Pakistan to increase its reliance on its nuclear capability, thus lowering the nuclear threshold which militates against strategic stability.

The introduction of nuclear powered and nuclear armed submarines would complicate the maritime security environment, and any accidental collision involving nuclear armed submarine with a nuclear or conventional submarine could create a serious crisis which calls for some agreement to avoid such incidents and to mitigate the consequences should such an incident happen accidentally. The need for such an agreement has been agreed to even in the Lahore MoU of February 1999.

Confidence Building Measures aside, there is no overarching strategic restraint architecture between India and Pakistan. India has refused to take up Pakistan's proposal for a

Strategic Restraint Regime, neither has it come up with an alternative proposal of its own. Institutionalised risk reduction and crisis management structures are non-existent, and the two sides have failed to devise any mechanism to insulate and protect their bilateral dialogue process from the shocks of incidents perpetrated by non-state actors.

Existing Stabilisation Measures Suggestions for the Future

It is evident that India and Pakistan understand the value of nuclear/missile-related confidence building and stabilisation measures. They have been regularly exchanging lists of their nuclear facilities at the beginning of every year as stipulated by their 1989 agreement on non-attack of each other's nuclear installations. Agreement on pre-notification of ballistic missile flight tests has also been followed by both sides. Recognising the importance of reliable communications between key officials India and Pakistan have since upgraded the communications between their respective DGMOs through fiber-optic links. They have also established a hotline between the two foreign secretaries especially for exchange of information in case of a nuclear crisis. There is an agreement on reducing the risks from nuclear accidents.

There is, however, a need to explore additional confidence building measures given the transformation of the security environment since the last of these CBMs were negotiated in 2007. Some of the suggested CBMs /stabilisation measures for future negotiations could be:-

- Agreement on Prohibition of Cyber Attacks on Nuclear Command and Control and other nuclear installations.
- Negotiations for a South Asian ABM (Anti-Ballistic Missile) Treaty to impose restrictions on development and deployment of anti-ballistic missile systems.

- Restoration of ceasefire along the Line of Control.
- Joint declaration to refrain from adopting provocative military doctrines.
- Inclusion of provision to pre-notify cruise missile flight tests in the existing agreement on pre-notification of ballistic missile flight tests.
- Agreement on avoidance of incidents at sea.
- Up-gradation/expansion of foreign secretaries hotlines into Nuclear Risk Reduction Centres (NRRCs) which should be manned round the clock.
- Negotiations on developing an overarching strategic restraint/stabilisation regime.
- Explore the possibility of working out an agreement on the lines of Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) agreement to place locational restrictions on offensive forces to reduce to the minimum the possibility of surprise attacks.

Analysis/Conclusions

In South Asia, most of the causes of instability are present that include arms race instability, acute trust deficit, unresolved territorial disputes, provocative conventional war fighting doctrines and lack of clarity on nuclear doctrines. There have already been at least three major crises since 1998, but the redeeming feature so far has been the recessed deterrence postures of the two countries, which are helpful during crises and provide a safety valve against accidental or unauthorised use. Potential for arms race instabilities is always there, since both India and Pakistan are busy in building up their respective fissile material stocks and are developing and flight testing ever more capable and sophisticated missiles. India is also actively working on the development and/or acquisition of BMD (Ballistic Missile Defence) systems, which would force Pakistan to introduce both quantitative as well as qualitative improvements in its arsenal. The India-US nuclear deal and the pursuit of fast breeder programme has opened up a vast new potential for India to substantially increase its fissile material stockpiles. Following the dictates of the action-reaction syndrome, which has historically determined the nature and direction of India-Pakistan relations,

Pakistan has responded by enhancing its own plutonium production capacity by embarking on the construction of new plutonium production reactors at its Khushab nuclear complex,²⁵ and hardening its position on the Fissile Material Cut-off Treaty negotiations at the Conference on Disarmament at Geneva. It is yet to be seen, as to how India reacts to Pakistan's development and testing of the short-range missile NASR, capable of carrying small nuclear payloads. Should India also decide to develop and field a comparable weapon system, the nuclear competition in South Asia will enter a new and dangerous dimension, with serious repercussions for strategic stability in the region.

The unrestrained R&D effort by India and Pakistan will provide an impetus for an arms competition. Growing influence of the scientific community and the undiminished public support for the expanding nuclear and missile capabilities will also generate pressures, for a sustained competition. India and Pakistan have agreed upon some useful nuclear / missiles-related CBMs, though, institutional mechanisms for crisis management such as Nuclear Risk Reduction Centres (NRRCs) have not been established. There is also no overarching Strategic Restraint Regime (SRR). Pakistan's proposed SRR has been turned down by India. Introduction of TNWs (Theatre Nuclear Weapons) does not bode well for strategic stability due to their escalation potential and greater probability of use as compared to the strategic systems.²⁶ While avoiding the deployment of the potentially destabilising systems such as ballistic missile defences or the TNWs, both sides need to refrain from propounding threatening operational doctrines, such as Cold Start or Proactive Operations, which generate unnecessary pressures on the other side to respond. Though both sides had agreed in the Lahore Memorandum of Understanding of February 1999²⁷ to discuss their security doctrines and concepts, they have failed to do so, to the detriment of regional stability. A sustained result-oriented dialogue process that is insulated from the actions of the non-state actors is the only way out for a peaceful and prosperous future for the two South Asian neighbours. It is important for both to understand that after their overt nuclearisation, war is no more an option as an instrument of policy. India should realise that by introducing nuclear weapons in South Asia and compelling Pakistan to follow suit, it has

itself neutralised its conventional advantage and it would be vain and dangerous on its part to seek space for the employment of its enormous conventional force to browbeat Pakistan. Both countries would also need to accept the reality that nuclear weapons tend to perpetuate the status quo which can only be profitably changed through negotiations.

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