



The Similarities and Differences in the Nuclear Postures of India and China, and the Prospect of Strategic Stability between the Two Countries

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Abstract

Asia is home to nuclear powers, such as China, India, and Pakistan, which are seeking to develop and modernise their military programmes. Motivated by the need to counter potential security risks, each state aims to develop nuclear ballistic missiles and cruise missile delivery systems. Such nuclear competition is dangerous, given the increasing lack of confidence and the failure of diplomatic steps in place to minimise confrontational risk.

The nuclear dimension of the relationship between China and India is striking vis-à-vis other nuclear competitions. On account of significant asymmetries in their second-strike capabilities, their deterrence relationship should require military stability and necessitate risks such as potential nuclear use or threat of use, and a nuclear arms race. Nevertheless, the demonstration of such risks has been restrained to a substantial extent. This situation can be defined by the characteristics of the overall China-India relationship, the stability of the balance of conventional weapons and battlefield tactics, the unification of confidence-building measures, the nonexistence of the “stability-instability paradox” dialogue, and the political conception of nuclear weapons of these two countries. (Kurita, 2018, pp. 37-38)

This academic essay will examine the similarities and differences in the nuclear postures and its consequence on the strategic stability between India and China. Moreover, Pakistan also one of the essential players in the region because it is a well-known fact that the Chinese government supports Pakistan’s nuclear program. As a result, it increases the tension between these nations in Asia in terms of nuclear proliferation, especially India. This article is divided into three sections. The first part deals with the Chinese nuclear arsenal and strategic doctrine. It then describes the Indian nuclear force and deterrent capabilities. The final section examines the similarities and differences in nuclear postures and the prospects for strategic stability between these two countries.

Keywords: Nuclear, Chinese Nuclear, Indian Nuclear

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1. Introduction

China has become the first Asian state to produce and test a nuclear weapon. Chinese nuclear weapons were developed to deter both the US and the USSR. In 1964, China put its first nuclear weapon to the test. (Frey, 2006, pp. 10-13) Then, on 17 June 1967, the first Chinese thermonuclear test codenamed Test No.6, consisting of a hydrogen bomb, was carried out at Lop Nur. (Liu, 1972, pp. 36-37) Nowadays, Beijing is thought to have approximately 300 warheads in its inventory. (Kristensen & Norris, 2016, pp. 205-06)

India has never been a member of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). The first Indian nuclear device testing, described by the Indian government as the Smiling Buddha, was carried out after the establishment of the NPT in 1974. (Mohanty, 2013, pp. 59-60) It seems to have been motivated mainly as a deterrent towards China. In 1998, India publicly tested nuclear warheads and thermonuclear devices in Operation *Shakti*. (Sheppard, 2002, pp. 203-04) Moreover, in 2005, Washington officially perceived New Delhi as a responsible nation with high-level nuclear technology and agreed on full nuclear cooperation between the two nations. (Bajoria & Pan, 2010) This is seen as a tacit entry into the aforementioned nation's nuclear community.

2. The Chinese Nuclear Arsenal and Strategic Doctrine

The development of China's nuclear arsenal gained momentum in the 1980s and continues to do so at present. However, although specific knowledge is unavailable about China's nuclear arsenals and plans to develop its innovation, credible information exists on both. Beijing heavily relies on the ballistic missile systems to carry and transport nuclear warheads, of which there are five primary types: the DF-3, DF-4, DF-5, DF-21, and DF-31. However, the DF-3 is currently being decommissioned as China moves on to longer-range missile systems. (Norris & Kristensen, 2003, pp. 77) Potential plans for improvement include reconstructing the DF-31 to extend its range to more than 10,000 kilometres so it can reach the US territory. (FAS, 1999)

Washington intelligence officials estimate that Beijing has merely 20 nuclear warheads, although that figure is expected to increase. The US expects that China will have around 100 warheads by 2015, primarily aimed at the American territory. (Norris & Kristensen, 2003, pp. 79) Although the reliability of these figures is uncertain, it is understood that China can generate far more than its current holdings of stockpiles. Based on its defensive nuclear-weapons policy, China has opted not to produce more warheads than what it considers appropriate.

Immediately after its first nuclear testing in 1964, China declared the intention to stick to a policy of No-First Use (NFU). (Pande, 2000) It corresponds with the Chinese perception that nuclear weapons are mainly a political instrument used to discourage and deter opponents instead of destroying them. The NFU policy is a pledge for Beijing that it will never be the first to conduct a nuclear war and participate in mutually assured destruction. To further



demonstrate Chinese NFU policy, China is believed to keep its nuclear arms under strict command and control, with unfuelled missiles and separately stored warheads. (Lewis, 2007, pp. 41-43) Interestingly, China has never taken part in a nuclear arms race as that of the US and the USSR during the Cold War. China is relying on limited deterrence instead. (Johnston, 1995, pp. 5-7) The Chinese deterrence strategy also maintains a limited deterrent doctrine, which emphasises the ability to survive the first strike and react proportionately. (Johnston, 1995, pp. 19-20) China aims to deter other states from interfering in local conflicts or threatening China directly. Beijing may establish the legitimacy of its nuclear weapons programme with the limited deterrence doctrine while maintaining caution in its use.

3. India's Nuclear Force and Deterrent Capabilities

The precise volume and readiness of Indian nuclear warheads are unclear, but some institutes believe India currently has approximately 60 nuclear warheads with enough plutonium to generate around 50 more. India relies on two main missiles, the *Prithvi* and the *Agni*. (Tellis, 2001, pp. 18-20) The former is a short-range missile with the ranging capability of less than 500 km. The latter, developed in 2002, has an approximate range of 700 km. Furthermore, New Delhi is currently developing Agni missiles with a more extended range of up to 5,000 km. (Kanwal, 2016)

Indian nuclear policy is based on four core concepts: NFU pledge, deterrence, civil command and control, and eventual global disarmament. The NFU policy signifies the determination of India never to launch and conduct nuclear war. Similar to Chinese nuclear strategy, Indian nuclear doctrine depends on its capacity to serve as a deterrent in retaliatory action. New Delhi claims that as long as it has a survivable nuclear capability, it will be able to deter attackers for fear of a reprisal, which fulfils its credible minimum deterrence doctrine. (Subrahmanyam, 2002, pp. 76-78) In 1999, the Indian National Security Advisory Board released an official Indian policy setting out the conditions for their approach to deterrence. The Indian government also emphasises that its nuclear weapons must be credible, effective and survivable. This means that if India was attacked first, it can threaten and carry out a devastating counterattack. (Perkovich, 2002, pp. 51-52) Another aspect of India's nuclear policy is ensuring that political leaders maintain a firm grip on nuclear capability. (Subrahmanyam, 2002, pp. 80) Indian authorities assert that its nuclear arsenal can only be accessed and controlled by the highest of political leaders. (Perkovich, 2002, pp. 53-55) This minimises the possibility of unauthorised and accidental launching due both to India's NFU strategy and its civilian weapons order. Although India has nuclear arms capability, it tends to be interested in worldwide nuclear abolishment. If other countries had vowed to get rid of their nuclear weapons, India expressed that it would reciprocate the same commitment. (Subrahmanyam, 2002, pp. 81) As examined in this section, the Indian doctrine demonstrates significant caution in the use of nuclear forces.



4. The similarities and differences in the nuclear postures of India and China, and the prospect of strategic stability between China and India

The following points are common to Beijing and New Delhi. Firstly, their political leadership, which has the sole nuclear policy decision-making power, has perceived the nuclear forces as strategic weapons that are entirely different from conventional weapons. Secondly, it was conceived that even a few nuclear warheads and the possibility of guaranteed retaliation could relinquish nuclear threats from more powerful opponents. Thirdly, in the nuclear policy-making process, the military control over the operation nuclear weapons has been severely weakened, although it has been of gradually changing in recent years. (Kampani, 2014, pp. 6-12)

Nowadays, Beijing and New Delhi are both part of the world's nuclear-weapon states (NWS). With its nuclear test on 1 October 1964, China formally became a member of the nuclear community, making it the fifth NWS of the world. (Karnad, 2008, pp. 47) The test left the US wary about the repercussions of a nuclear China on the balance of power in Asia, and the world at large. As the stakes for non-proliferation of nuclear weapons rose, the NPT was signed in 1970 to prevent the horizontal proliferation of nuclear powers, conferring nuclear status only upon US, USSR, UK, France and China. (Kimball, 2020)

After the Sino-Indian war of 1962, and growing strategic closeness between Pakistan and China, the Chinese nuclear test of 1964 was a wake-up call for India. (Rai, 2009, pp. 121-22) Within the South Asian region, it was now challenged by two powers, one of which had gone nuclear. The lack of assistance from Washington or Moscow during the Sino-Indian war of 1962 left New Delhi incapable of relying on them against China. Thus, India decided to pursue the development of its own nuclear program in order to maintain a nuclear deterrent while remaining outside of the NPT in 1970.

India ran its first nuclear test in Pokhran, in 1974, under the Indira Gandhi government. (FAS, 2000) Its nuclear development program that had begun before independence was given a boosted post the Chinese test. It continued its nuclear weapon program in the shadows until the 1990s, along with Ballistic Missile Development (BMD), which is part of the weapons delivery system. By 1998, India had tested five nuclear devices as part of the Pokhran-II Test, bringing its nuclear program out of the shadows. (Rai, 2009, pp. xi-xiv) This caused some deterioration India's relations with the US and the non-proliferation community at the time and instigated Pakistan to bring out their nuclear program into the fore as well. It was then followed up by Islamabad testing its nuclear weapon within a span of a few weeks. (Rajain, 2005, pp. 295-98) It is suspected that Beijing has played a significant role in the development of Islamabad's nuclear capabilities, training its scientists and even sharing nuclear weapon designs and supporting nuclear device tests. (Kingsbury, 2009) It is seen as an attempt against India, their common enemy in the region, to establish a counterbalancing



force. That makes the region's nuclear threat three-way, with Pakistan being an intrinsic part of the nuclear relations between China and India.

India's northern part being blocked by two strategically allied nuclear weapon states is one of the significant constraints that it faces in its quest for power. As per current estimates, China has around 260 warheads in its inventory, with Pakistan at around 140, and India at around 110. (Davenport, 2019) Both India and China have made an NFU pledge and would be unlikely to instigate a war with each other. However, recent tensions with Pakistan have prompted dialogue within India about an alteration of its NFU policy vis-à-vis Pakistan.

India is currently building on its nuclear capabilities, which are significantly less mature than Chinese capabilities. The Indo-US Nuclear deal allows India to use more of its indigenously available Uranium for weapons while importing material for nuclear power use. China has flagged this as a violation of the NPT. Furthermore, in 1996, New Delhi also declined to endorse the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT). (Karnad, 2008, pp. 68-69) Recently, India had two quick missile tests of the long-range missile *Agni-IV* and its first Intercontinental Ballistic Missile (ICBM), *Agni-V*. (Hagerty, 2020, pp. 113) These were met by criticisms from China, and some consider China to have been rattled by the rapid development of Indian missiles that can reach any part of Chinese territory.

With the construction of artificial islands and human-made isles, China's growing expansion in the South China Sea has implications for its economic and naval military futures. Some perceive this as a crucial step for China to focus on its maritime capabilities, including nuclear-based submarines which can be positioned as the forces for future conflicts to reach Indian territory. The theory of the String of Pearls also mentions about the efforts by Beijing to create a network of military bases in the Indian Ocean area which has historically been a stronghold for New Delhi. (Brewster, 2014, pp. 137-38) However, with New Delhi being an arms importer and having a lower military expenditure budget than Beijing, it is more difficult for the Indian government to focus on improving its naval capabilities and countering developments in Chinese maritime posture. ('Military expenditure (% of GDP)' 2018) However, India too has been participating in naval exercises along with US military, in efforts to strengthen its forces and ties.

Is security through deterrence being successfully achieved till yet?

Even though nuclearization has put the region at the stake of security threats and ever-lasting hostilities, it is also important to recognise that the same nuclear potential has simultaneously incurred the element of deterrence which arguably supplies some stability to the region. It is arguably due to the possession of the nuclear weapons that a confrontation of nuclear powers has been avoided. The 1999 Kargil Crisis and the general military mobilisation called Operation Parakram not escalating into full-scale warfare or nuclear war proved that mutual deterrence between India and Pakistan was effective. (Basrur, 2020, pp. 509)



Therefore, it can be assumed that deterrence has been successful until now, but whether it will continue to do so in future generates many different assumptions from nuclear optimists and pessimists alike who upheave the idea that the future of South Asia is difficult to presume. Nuclear deterrence continues to experience daunting technological and political challenges in the region. This situation has been continuing in South Asia since nuclearization as predictions prove to be wrong most of the times.

Analysing the impacts on regional politics can be seen in India-Pakistan and India-China, an apparent rivalry and ongoing animosity. No progress has been made on crucial issues regarding current Confidence Building Measures (CBM), doctrinal restraints, dispute resolution, arms control measures, and a shared vision for regional strategic stability remains elusive. (Banerjee, 2010, pp. 346-49)

The China-Pakistan-India-US quadrangle

This China-Pakistan-US-India quadrangle plays a vital role in determining the policies and courses of action in the South Asian theatre. Pakistan has at its best, China, as its primary ally both socially and economically. Pakistan has been enjoying the benefit of recognizing China as an independent state at very first. We see a quite strong socio-economic bond between China and Pakistan particularly through many agreements, aid programs and now a significant project, China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). (Kurita, 2015, pp. 4-5) It shows that if Pakistan is threatened or its security is at stake, China is there to stand by it, which is a matter of concern for India. This factor plays an essential role in India's deterrence.

In order to strengthen relations with the Muslim world, China should count on its alliance with Pakistan. Beijing also perceives Islamabad as a strategically important state for preserving a regional balance with New Delhi. In the sense of China, Pakistan has become more valuable for the US. It would continue to receive American attention because of Pakistan's growing nuclear weapons capabilities. Nonetheless, China opts to continue maintaining a robust military, political, and economic partnership with Pakistan. (Markey, Haenle, & Saalman, 2011)

On the other hand, the relationship between the US and India has grown stronger over time, although India did not join the capitalist block and did not sign the NPT. The US imposed sanctions Pakistan but not on India, and India was recognized as a responsible NWS by the US and got much of the nuclear aid and assistance later on. The reason for this is the common interest between the US and India to stand firm against the China-Pakistan bond, more so as the CPEC is promoting severe economic and trade concerns for the US. (Yunsong, 2017, pp. 25-27) Also, to fulfil its strategic interests and to exploit Pakistan for its Afghanistan's purposes, the US needs to stay actively involved in South Asia's politics.



Balance of power in South Asia

Nuclearization and the Strategic Partnership have helped improve South Asia's balance of power. Since nuclearization, a new balance of power paradigm which takes into account the Indo-US equilibrium between China and Pakistan has arisen.

Beijing and Islamabad are enhancing robust strategic partnership against Indo-US alliances. Reportedly, Beijing is also looking to expand its nuclear cooperation with Islamabad towards this end. In 2005, both Washington and New Delhi signed a civil nuclear agreement to hedge against Beijing and balanced its support for Islamabad. (Ganguly & Scobell, 2005, pp. 37-38) On the other hand, Pakistan has attempted to leverage India by acquiring qualitatively superior weapons and gaining diplomatic support from major powers, particularly China. Nevertheless, Pakistan has considered nuclear choice as the most suitable to equalise India's geopolitical and strategic challenges through its internal efforts after Indian struggle to attain nuclear capabilities. Pakistan wants to counterpoise the clout of the Indo-US deal through Chinese nuclear-armed forces cooperation and support. Following US non-responsive attitude to Pakistan's demand to conclude an agreement similar to what Washington signed with New Delhi in 2005, Pakistan became eager to expand its nuclear relations with China and offset Indian power. Pakistan's gesture is also a demonstration that it has a credible alternative of forging a nuclear agreement with China instead of the US. (Joshi, 2011)

Compared to the Indo-US partnership, which was a disturbing factor not for strategic stability in South Asia but the nuclear non-proliferation regime in the world. Both Pakistan and China view the nature of Indo-US relations as disturbing the strategic equilibrium for the South Asian region. Even so, it has also been felt that the Indo-US nexus might pay them a dividend in future geopolitics in the long run. In 1998, however, the rise of Pakistan as a nuclear power on the globe caused a severe setback to Indo-US interests. (Sasikumar, 2019, pp. 152-55) Thus, the disparity in the power game of South Asia that was once felt in the post-Cold War period has now been reduced.

Washington is also building strategic alliances across Beijing's periphery mainly through its military presence in Mongolia, Central Asia, Kyrgyzstan, Afghanistan, India, Taiwan, Japan and South Korea. Both the US and India perceive China as a significant challenge. India cannot stand alone in the face of China's threat; that is why it needs US help to counter and deter China.



5. Conclusion

In conclusion, China and India have in common the following points: the view of nuclear weapons as strategic weapons, their belief in diminutive nuclear forces and the possibility of retaliation could relinquish nuclear threats, and the nuclear forces operating in the nuclear policy-making phase have been significantly weakened.

Therefore, nuclearization has many impacts on regional politics, mostly the negative and incomprehensive ones. The continuous cloud of security threats across South Asian states makes them ever so concerned about the political and nuclear activities of neighbouring states vis-à-vis their own security. A new balance of power dynamics has emerged since the nuclearization of South Asian states. In continuous efforts of modernizing nuclear weapons, South Asia has probably forgotten to integrate at social, economic and cultural levels. South Asia needs to neutralize the risks and fears of war by containing its nuclear energy through treaties and nuclear doctrines. Also, opinions should be moulded in a positive context so that South Asian ordinary people can live in peace.

Given the structural conflicts in the region and the longstanding India-Pakistan conflict, nuclear power is likely to be a permanent feature in the subcontinent. Since Pakistan cannot compete with India on the conventional weapon front, it has to adopt the nuclear path, along with assistance from China.

India is preparing for a two-front war with China and Pakistan. Opinions vary on whether it makes strategic sense for China to engage in such a war, but it is likely to continue assisting Pakistan with its nuclear weapons program. Given strengthening economic ties between India and China, and the fact that the border disputes lie in remote parts of most countries, it is unlikely that China and India will go to a full-scale conflict, let alone a nuclear war. However, the presence of Pakistan as a wildcard in the region adds to the complexity of the situation.

Therefore, there are two conflicting impulses towards collaboration and rivalry, which both nations are concurrently acting on. The significant factor, which is competitiveness, remains the underlying force behind the relationships between Sino-Indian. Although the nature of the competition may have moved away from an overt military confrontation, in the future, it will undoubtedly continue to manifest itself in persistent friction between the two nations.



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