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Complexities of Achieving Strategic Stability in Southern Asia: An Indian Perspective

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The Cuban missile crisis of 1962 brought home the importance of finding a mutually acceptable modus vivendi between two nuclear weapons states. Poised at the brink of the nuclear precipice, Washington and Moscow jointly experienced the danger of sliding into the nuclear abyss. This generated a shared sense of peril, which prompted the search for minimising risks and maximising co-habitation. Muddling through the situation, one answer was found in establishing a condition of strategic stability.

The concept of strategic stability has never been precisely defined, but it did get loosely fleshed out during the ensuing decades. It coalesced around two ideas: the first of these was to remove incentives for both states to resort to quick or early use of nuclear weapons in a crisis. So, strategic stability was believed to be obtained when both parties accepted that launching first, whether to disarm the opponent or to protect oneself from being disarmed, was futile. The success of technological advances towards survivability was critical in establishing this plank of stability that came to be known as crisis stability. The second idea was to remove incentives for both sides to engage in a race for offensive and defensive capabilities. Accepting mutual vulnerability was the bedrock of this dimension of arms race stability, which was gradually institutionalised into an arms control architecture. In a way, strategic stability demanded commitment to non-provocative nuclear behaviour. It could be possible when both sides saw it as being mutually beneficial since it reduced risks of nuclear use in crisis; and unnecessary and expensive nuclear arms racing in peacetime.

While perfect strategic stability could never be said to have been obtained as it was always susceptible to political and technological changes, it started to come under exceptional stress in the mid-2010s. This happened as a result of a bitter souring of relations between Washington and Moscow, and the emergence of China as a new nuclear peer. Each of the three is today engaged in fierce strategic modernisation. New offensive and defensive technologies are adversely bearing upon both pillars of strategic stability: survivability and mutual vulnerability.

The contemporary nuclear landscape is multipolar and complex. With nine nuclear armed states across the world, there is not only a multiplicity of dyads but also many of these elongate into nuclear chains with one impinging on another. This is particularly true of Southern Asia in which three nuclear armed states co-habit: China, India and Pakistan. Their mutual nuclear equations are further impacted by the nuclear doctrine, posture and capabilities of a non-regional power, the United States (US), which, in turn, is impacted by the politico-military-nuclear stresses from Russia and North Korea.

Establishing strategic stability in such an entangled web of nuclear relations is obviously riddled with complexities. This paper seeks to identify some of the features peculiar to the region that complicate attainment of strategic stability. Thereafter, it offers some tentative measures towards strategic stability. While the task appears daunting given the state of relations, it is critical to give some thought to this conundrum and explore options. Not doing so could only exacerbate instability and heighten chances of deterrence breakdown – a risk that the region can ill afford.

Complexities of Nuclear Southern Asia

Ideally, every nuclear dyad must seek strategic stability so as to avoid risks of crisis and arms race instability. In order to minimise the chances of nuclear use, whether deliberate (considered and premeditated) or inadvertent (due to accident, miscalculation or misperceptions), and circumvent the offence-defence spiral, nuclear armed states must evolve an understanding about each other's nuclear doctrines and postures, and establish modes of alleviating concerns and suspicions.

Doing so, however, proves to be a special challenge in Southern Asia owing to the complex web of diverse deterrence relationships between the three countries. Threat perceptions are fuelled by the fact that the three are geographically contiguous and share unresolved territorial disputes since several thousands of square kilometres are contested. Absence of clearly defined boundaries leaves ample room for misinterpretation. Mutual accusations of the illegal presence of each other's troops in territory claimed by the other are routine. Fortunately, most such incidents have been contained. But, the risk of escalation, in theory, always exists whenever a crisis takes place.

There is also an interconnectedness in force postures and structures of the three nuclear players. China is the oldest and largest nuclear state in the region. Much of its current strategic modernisation is being driven by the threats it perceives from the US. Its capability build-up, however, raises concerns in India. And, steps taken by India to ensure credible nuclear deterrence feed Pakistan's security perceptions.

In the absence of a dialogue on strategic issues between India-Pakistan and India-China, there is a sense of uncertainty about what the other is doing and why. This obviously encourages hedging. Responses to perceived threats create new security dilemmas, leading to further hardening of positions. The following paragraphs highlight some of the complications that afflict the region and adversely impact the possibilities of establishing strategic stability.

Varied Role of Nuclear Weapons

Nations acquire nuclear weapons to meet specific objectives. China and India describe the role of their nuclear weapons as safeguarding against nuclear blackmail or coercion. So, deterring an adversary's nuclear capability is the primary task of their weapons. Pakistan, on the other hand, uses its weapons solely for deterring the superior conventional force of India. It believes that "a weaker power can level the playing field vis-à-vis a larger strategic adversary by acquiring nuclear weapon".[1] This parity, however, is used to conduct covert warfare through cross-border terrorism while deterring an Indian conventional response.

The difference in roles of nuclear weapons complicates efforts at strategic stability. For Pakistan, the unfavourable conventional equation with India is of paramount importance. For India, Pakistan's use of the terror infrastructure and China's growing military strength and assertiveness compress the room for addressing Pakistan's concerns about conventional disparity. Meanwhile, for China, superior American capability is the primary point of reference, which drives its own capability build-up, including advances in fields such as cyber, space, electronic warfare. This, however, triggers another cycle of concerns in the region, affecting the chances of strategic stability.

Disparate Methods of Establishing Deterrence

Every nuclear armed state finds its own way of establishing deterrence: through a large or small arsenal, by threatening first use of nuclear weapons or retaliation, by building counterforce capabilities for denial or countervalue for punishment, and by maintaining clarity through a declared doctrine or ambiguity and deception. In Southern Asia, manifestation of all these methods can be found.

Pakistan prefers to project first use of nuclear weapons, including through use of tactical nuclear weapons. A strategy of brinkmanship is used to deter the possibility of having to engage with India's conventional military in response to sub-conventional acts of terrorism. It likes to play up the risk of nuclear escalation to augment deterrence.[2] Thomas Schelling had explained such behaviour as "manipulating the shared risk of war. It means exploiting the danger that somebody may inadvertently go over the brink, dragging the other with him."[3] The possibility of nuclear exchange is meant to evoke fear not only to deter India, but also to scare international audiences into getting involved in conflict resolution. Such an approach of establishing deterrence by playing up the risks, however, is not conducive to strategic stability because if that was established, it would deprive Pakistan of the perceived space available for sub-conventional actions. Therefore, as some suggest, Pakistan has a desire not for nuclear stability but "managed instability".[4]

1. Sumit Ganguly and S Paul Kapur, India, Pakistan and the Bomb (Columbia University Press, 2010)
2. See M. Sethi, "Decoding Pakistan's Nukes", Defense News, 11 August 2013; T. Hundley, "Race to the End", Foreign Policy, 5 September 2012, https://foreignpolicy.com/2012/09/05/race-to-the-end/; S. Gregory, "Pak Toxic Chaos Plan Changes Nuke Debate", Times of India, 6 March 2011, https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/home/sunday-times/all-that-matters/Pak-toxic-chaos-plan-changes-nuke-debate/articleshow/7637964.cms.
3. Thomas C Schelling, Arms and Influence (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), pp. 98-99
4. Hundley, n.2.

China has traditionally used opacity, and now uses ambiguity, to enhance its nuclear deterrence. Given the threat it perceives from US Ballistic Missile Defence (BMD) and possible use of long-range strategic missiles with conventional warheads to degrade its nuclear arsenal, China has found prudence in deploying dual use delivery systems and commingling its conventional and nuclear forces at the same base to raise the risk of 'nuclear entanglement'[5]. In doing so, it seeks to deter the US by heightening the risk that it might inadvertently hit sites where both kinds of assets are maintained, and which could be perceived as a nuclear attack, leading to nuclear escalation. The uncertainty so generated is supposed to enhance deterrence. While Beijing may feel compelled to do so partly due to its concerns about the survivability of its nuclear assets in the face of a US attack, the action, nevertheless, erodes chances of strategic stability.

In their attempt to establish and augment deterrence, the strategies of both Pakistan and China intensify crisis instability. While from their perspective they are increasing the risks to reduce the chance of deterrence breakdown, they actually raise the dangers to a dangerous level. In the case of the India-Pak dyad, this risk was highlighted when India, which has traditionally avoided military responses to repeated cross-border terrorist attacks, chose not to hold back in 2016 and 2019. After the attacks were traced to organisations that enjoyed Pakistani support, India carried out precise and calibrated military attacks on terrorist infrastructure in Pak territory. This indicated a willingness to manipulate the risk of war – an action that Pakistan has practiced in previous crises. With both nations now acting in the belief that they can manipulate and control risk generation, the stress on stability is obviously higher.

To some extent, the narrow role that India ascribes to its nuclear weapons allows it to establish deterrence through the stabilising concepts of credible minimum deterrence and no first use (NFU). This philosophical underpinning underscores the nuclear weapon as being best suited for deterrence by punishment. It eschews the need for a large arsenal given that the weapon is such that its use cannot but cause unacceptable damage. This is especially true in Southern Asia where population densities are high and the distinction between military and civilian targets is blurred. The NFU doctrine, meanwhile, directs India to place emphasis on survivability of retaliatory assets so that there is no temptation to use the nuclear weapons first for fear of losing them. By liberating itself from the pressures of early or first use of nuclear weapons, and allowing the adversary to make its own decision, India helps to stabilise crisis situations. Of course, the adversary may find it difficult to believe an NFU position, but the seriousness of India's commitment should be evident in its force structure and posture.

Small numbers of nuclear weapons maintained at relaxed alert levels are conducive for strategic stability. China and India adopt this approach, at least up to now. Hence, despite the long drawn out military stand-off between the two that persists even at the time of writing this paper, a sense of strategic stability exists. However, China's increased use of ambiguity and a possible change in force posture to address perceived threats from the US could end up changing the situation in the region, thereby complicating the chances of achieving strategic stability.

Use of Proxy Actors

It is no secret that Southern Asia is home to a large number of terrorist organisations that have long received state support, whether it was from the US to the Mujahideen during the Cold War, or from Pakistan to jehadi outfits meant to be used as instruments of disruption against India or the US. These have grown in influence, reach and power over the decades. Some of these are also known to have a desire to acquire nuclear weapons as the ultimate terror device. And, if that were to happen, deterrence would come under great stress. Patronage of proxies, who also have a mind of their own, complicates establishment of strategic stability in the region. Their actions can create crises between states that can escalate to higher levels, especially since inter-state trust levels are so low.

5. James Acton, Escalation through Entanglement: How the Vulnerability of Command and Control Systems Raises the Risks of Inadvertent Nuclear War", International Security, vol. 43, no. 1, 2018, pp 56-99.

Lack of Trust and Absence of Dialogue

Nuclear-armed states should have mechanisms for dialogue to understand each other's threat perceptions, force structures and doctrines. An exchange of views can promote shared comprehension of nuclear risks too and this can encourage actions towards strategic stability.

But, the three regional nuclear players suffer from a lack of trust and the absence of a strategic dialogue. This is ironic since some positive features do characterise the two dyads. In the case of India and Pakistan, for instance, some nuclear confidence-building measures already exist. In fact, the agreement on non-attack on each other's nuclear facilities pre-dates the 1998 overt demonstration of nuclear weapons capability. Then, early in 1999, both showed impressive foresight in concluding the Lahore Memorandum of Understanding that included measures to promote mutual confidence and strategic stability. However, the clandestine occupation of Indian territory by the Pakistani Army within months of this document being signed drove a knife into the trust sought to be built. Thereafter, repeated terrorist attacks, allegations and counter-allegations, have led to a loss of bilateral dialogue. At the time of writing this piece, the positions have hardened and the possibility of any engagement on strategic stability looks bleak.

Meanwhile, in the context of India and China, the absence of dialogue is the result of Chinese inflexibility in accepting India as a state with nuclear weapons. Continuing to maintain a rigid position on NPT membership, it has refused to recognise the de facto reality of India's nuclear weapons. So, it refuses to engage on nuclear issues with New Delhi. Meanwhile, China's accumulation of material power and international stature has changed its recent manifest behaviour so drastically that the possibility of a dialogue stands further crushed. Given the ongoing India-China stand-off in Ladakh, which became particularly brutal in June 2020 when 20 Indian soldiers lost their lives resisting a Chinese incursion into territory claimed by India, New Delhi seems to have hardened its position. The equation today stands at a complicated juncture with a breakdown of the border management mechanisms crafted over many years. The chance of getting to a nuclear dialogue for strategic stability under the circumstances looks grim.

Tentative Suggestions for Strategic Stability in Southern Asia

Strategic stability evidently faces many challenges in Southern Asia. In fact, given the many asymmetries that exist in doctrines and capability, and the manner in which they seem to be hedging against one another and harbouring deep concerns about the other's strategic intentions, it is doubtful whether there even exists a shared desire for strategic stability. None of them has explicitly expressed any sense of nuclear risks or a need to address them.

In view of the above reality, offering suggestions on possible measures towards strategic stability is a risk in itself. However, the paper dares to offer some tentative thoughts that can be picked up when the political climate is right. After all, neighbours cannot shift their locations, but they can shift their policies, and hopefully that would happen before a Cuban missile crisis like situation brings the region to the edge of a nuclear precipice.

Interestingly, some ideas for establishing strategic stability can be drawn from two attributes of similar nuclear doctrines of India and China. The first of these is the idea of Credible Minimum Deterrence (CMD), or nuclear sufficiency, that can help establish arms race stability. It eschews large, open-ended stockpiles and expresses contentment with the least amount needed to cause unacceptable damage. Of course, acceptance of mutual vulnerability and rejection of missile defences is necessary. Second, No First Use (NFU) helps establish crisis stability by reassuring adversaries that they would not be targeted with nuclear weapons until they chose to use theirs. Liberating the adversary from his use-or-lose dilemma is an important benefit of NFU. The current nuclear force structures of India and China, built around these doctrinal principles, foster strategic stability.

However, contemporary global nuclear developments could test the continued adherance to the above doctrinal principles. One such development is the return of the idea of limited nuclear war. In response to US BMD and growing pressures to get China to enter negotiations on arms control, some writings

in Global Times, the mouthpiece of the Chinese Communist Party, have begun hinting at increasing China's warhead numbers. An incipient debate is also ongoing on change to first use postures. Two American analysts had opined in a study in 2009 that China,

> *holds to the view that the United States is seeking 'absolute security' by which they mean that the United States is seeking to escape the nuclear balance of power in order to be able to use military power whenever and wherever it pleases…., and without fear of retaliation by nuclear or other means.*[6]

Such perceptions drive the growth of China's strategic capability. Aimed though they are at the US, they have a bearing on strategic stability in the region. It would be best if the current, more stabilising, doctrinal positions are accepted for their benefits through some bilateral or multilateral mechanisms before they succumb to pressures for change in either China or India.

Strategic stability requires two pre-conditions: confidence in survivability of arsenals; and acceptance of mutual vulnerability. Fortunately, the three regional players satisfy these conditions. Each has built a secure second-strike capability that rules out the possibility of a disarming first strike. Thomas Schelling wrote, "the situation is stable when either side can destroy the other whether it strikes first or second—that is, when neither in striking first can destroy the other's ability to strike back."[7] On the second front too, given their geographical and demographic size, there can be no hiding from the fact that they are vulnerable to each other's nuclear weapons. None of the three has built any damage limitation capability of an order that can effectively defend against an adversary's nuclear attack.

Given these facts, the region does meet the conditions of strategic stability. It is in the interest of each of the three to establish a workable stable nuclear relationship to avoid stumbling into a nuclear war owing to crisis instability. At the same time, given their economic troubles, which have only been exacerbated by the pandemic, none can afford to be sucked into an unnecessary nuclear arms race. Agreements on strategic stability would help each to retain a balanced view of the role of the weapon in national priorities.

If China can get over its fixation on not talking to India, then a strategic dialogue between the two nations could be a good starting point to understand each other's threat perceptions, doctrines and force postures. This would help reduce misperceptions that can be generated due to non-engagement and hedging.

Secondly, crisis stability can be significantly increased by formalising low alert levels. Fortunately, the arsenals of China, India and Pakistan are already in such a state. An agreement that formalises this could be a useful step towards crisis stability especially once new technologies, such as hypersonic missiles or the introduction of artificial intelligence in nuclear command and control compress response timelines. In fact, this may be most helpful if such a measure could be adopted across nuclear armed states since it is unlikely that China would agree to such a step without reciprocity from the US, which will demand the same from Russia.

Lastly, it is most important that nations recognise and understand the effects of deterrence breakdown. Knowledge of the consequences of a nuclear exchange could be a driver for engendering a shared desire to build strategic stability. Joint studies or even movies on the subject can shake political leaders out of complacency and fire popular imagination on the risks of nuclear war.

6. Brad Roberts and Michael Keifer, Asia's Major Powers and the Emerging Challenges to Nuclear Stability Among Them, Institute for Defence Analysis Paper 4423, Defense Threat Reduction Agency, Advanced Systems and Concepts Office, Report Number ASCO 2009 011 DASW01-04-C-0003, MIPR 07-2369, p, 23

7. T. C. Schelling, Surprise Attack and Disarmament, (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, December 10, 1958), p.4

Conclusion

The concept of strategic stability provides an over-arching framework for ensuring security in the nuclear age. It can also help rationalise nuclear forces and assess the wisdom of new nuclear acquisitions and deployments. It can help reduce the temptation to plan on the basis of worst-case assumptions about an adversary's intentions and capabilities. A useful yardstick for measuring deterrence is to have enough capability to give confidence in the survivability of one's own nuclear forces to cause unacceptable damage. Stability comes from mutual confidence of the two powers in the reliability of their nuclear deterrence.

Given that the region is crisis-prone due to unresolved territorial disputes, and that some nations have strategies that believe in creating risks as a way of enhancing deterrence, escalation remains a theoretical possibility. However, it should be minimised by reining in incentives for the use of nuclear weapons since, irrespective of how the use takes place, none of the states anywhere in the world has the health and social infrastructure to handle the humanitarian crisis that would result. The pandemic has already shown the shortcomings. And, this may seem like a minor calamity compared to what would happen if even a few mushroom clouds were to go up. All nuclear armed nations need to wake up to this reality.

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