

Deterrence; Theory and Practice in Changing South Asian Strategic Stability

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Abstract

More than twenty-two years since the overt nuclearization of South Asia, incidents like Pulwama in February 2019 place a question mark on deterrence stability between India and Pakistan. The paper revisits one of the key pillars of strategic stability; deterrence to analyse how deterrence stability can be reinforced. It then analyses the Kashmir issue and role of the US in the context of great power competition as one of the key factors that have and continue to shape South Asian regional stability. It is a qualitative attempt to evaluate South Asian strategic calculus and relies upon secondary data. The deductive logic has been applied under the framework of the realist paradigm. The paper highlights Indian actions and policies which raise concerns over the decline of deterrence stability and Pakistan's response to such overtures. The paper argues that India's upward defence spending, reinforcing its conventional and strategic forces is worrisome, in comparison Pakistan has behaved in a rather adaptive, restrained and responsible manner. However, the existing status-quo is neither sustainable nor productive therefore, the Strategic Restraint Regime offers a pathway for reducing tensions between India and Pakistan, and

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moreover it offers an opportunity to both states to reduce dependence on external powers.

Keywords: Deterrence, Nuclear Weapons, Kashmir, USA, India, Pakistan, South Asia, Strategic Stability, Restraint Regime.

Introduction

Strategic Stability depends on both deterrence and arms control. It has been observed in the Cold War how the initial phase of confrontation, where arms race was dominant and security was seen through the prism of mutually assured destruction strategy that defined the US-USSR relationship. The confrontation phase was followed by an era of bilateral and multilateral agreements based on the concept of arms control, which became part of the national security policy, replacing arms race and presumably deterrence-based security approach. It can be safely inferred that both deterrence and arms control contribute to a state's security policy; the difference is that deterrence contributes to a negative strategic stability and arms control can be understood as generating positive strategic stability. In case of South Asian region, the element of arms control is largely missing and therefore reliance on nuclear deterrence is enhanced. For deterrence to be meaningful and effective, the importance of the deterrent's credibility, communication, and capability are the core essentials. If any of these elements are perceived as weak or otherwise, the stability of the relationship will be under stress and deterrence failure is inevitable.

The recent past has been marred by multiple crises of varying intensities. Starting with the US withdrawal from the Intermediate Nuclear Forces (INF) treaty, the breakdown of US-North Korea nuclear talks, the uncertain future of the lone arms control agreement New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) between the US and Russia (which has now been extended till February 2026) along with the fears of renewed arms competition among great powers (including China), continued hostilities between the US and Iran over the nuclear deal

and most dangerously, the nuclear-armed rivalry between India and Pakistan that almost always verges at the break out of an all-out war.² The world might as well be entering a new and more dangerous nuclear era unless leaders and governments act responsibly, collectively, and revive arms control regimes. As things stand, there is a little hope for optimism. To begin with, the idea of deterrence is under stress due to a new age of technological innovation which means states are interested in incorporating new technologies into their defence systems creating security dilemmas for others. Putin's claim of hypersonic missiles, Trump's announcement of a space force along with the existing triad and China's recent testing of hypersonic missiles speaks volume of the evolving arms race trajectory. States are constantly reviewing their counter force strike options and striving for domination as compared to balancing in order to gain competitive strategic advantage in the emerging era of great power competition which is in all likelihood impacting the South Asia strategic stability.

What is Deterrence?

The basis of the concept of deterrence lies in the Hobbesian school of thought, which argues that the retribution for committing a criminality must be more than the value which one receives from committing that crime.³ Glenn Snyder defines deterrence as the ability to dissuade your adversary.⁴ In the words of Richard Smoke, deterrence means persuading one's opponent that the cost to be paid of a particular

² Nicholas Miller, and Vipin Narang, "Is a New Nuclear Age upon us?", *Foreign Affairs*, December 31, 2019, Available at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2019-12-30/new-nuclear-age-upon-us> (accessed on 13 March 2021).

³ Alan Norrie, "Thomas Hobbes and the Philosophy of Punishment," *Law and Philosophy*, Vol. 3, no.2 (1984), 299.

⁴ Ward Wilson, "The Myth of Nuclear Necessity", *The New York Times*, January 13, 2013.

action will outweigh the benefits which one aims to achieve from it.⁵ In other words, deterrence is a form of persuasion in military strategy. To effectively communicate such a threat, the deterring state must choose what constitutes an attack and must decide what level of response would be adequate for deterrence to be effective. This depends on the assessment of enemy's intent and the values it assigns to them. For deterrence to work, the warning must also be credible, meaning that the potential aggressor should believe that the risk or cost of an attack would be far greater than its assumed benefits and the costs of such a move are real. As a strategy, deterrence is often interpreted as a defence measure, wherein the notion of Defence focuses on military abilities rather than intentions. While deterrence is based on the threat of punishment, defence is structured by negating adversary's ability to achieve intended aims once an attack has been initiated. Prior to the arrival of nuclear weapons, the concept of 'deterrence' and 'defence' were merely references to different time periods: before an attack has taken place the military forces are understood to deter an enemy whereas once an attack has taken place and when deterrence has failed, they are used to repel the attack.⁶

Given the unimaginable cost of nuclear conflict, strategists and policymakers have dedicated a great deal of consideration to the requirements of deterrence in the nuclear era. Odd as it may look, the primary issue with nuclear deterrence is that thankfully no two nuclear-armed states have gone to war with each other using their nuclear weapons. The result is that the assumptions of deterrence have been consequently deductive rather than inductive.⁷ This leaves us with questions which do not have linear answers. For example, there is

⁵ Aditi Malhotara, "Re-examining the Nuclear Deterrence Theory," (England: Ideas for Peace, November 2, 2010), Available at: http://www.monitor.upeace.org/printer.cfm?id_article=752 (accessed on 9 April 2021).

⁶ Martin Griffiths and Terry O'Callaghan, *International Relations: The Key Concepts* (London/New York: Routledge, 2002), 74.

⁷ Ibid.

no certainty as to what kind of attacks or behavior does the possession of nuclear weapons deter? Or exactly how many nuclear weapons are sufficient? This is because the credibility of a deterrent threat is determined by the perceptions of the opponent rather than the deterring state.

The primary challenge facing policy makers is to ensure the prevention of a nuclear war, which is why nuclear non-proliferation and related measures remain one of the top priorities on the international security agenda. A theoretical debate ensues on whether the mere existence of nuclear weapons is a threat to international peace and order or whether they contribute towards it. The debate is not new, both nuclear pessimists and optimists have their respective assumptions but have rather converged on the point that a nuclear war in itself is irrational and hence needs to be avoided at all costs. Kenneth Waltz, a neorealist and a proponent of the spread of nuclear weapons argued using the rational deterrence framework that states go to lengths in weighing their options and undergo a laborious task of a cost-benefit analysis making nuclear war a no-go option, hence making the existence of such weapons merely political and source of stability.⁸ Bernard Brodie argued that the primary purpose of states in a nuclear environment is to avoid wars rather than winning wars.⁹

Kenneth Waltz' contribution to the deterrence theory is significant. Waltz advocates an optimistic argument for the gradual spread of nuclear weapons which in effect will reinforce deterrence stability. He argues that nuclear weapons make the possibility of war less likely since they encourage both: defence and deterrence, due to the unacceptable damage, makes states act carefully and leaves little room for miscalculation.¹⁰ Using the rational actor model framework,

⁸ Kenneth Waltz, "The Spread of nuclear Weapons: More May Be Better," *Adelphi Papers*, No. 171 (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 1981).

⁹ Bernard Brodie, "The absolute weapon," in *Strategic Studies (2nd ed.)*, eds. Thomas G. Mahnken and Joseph A. Maiolo (London & New York: Routledge, 2014), 222.

¹⁰ Kenneth Waltz, "The Spread of nuclear Weapons."

Waltz is keen on the view that states are a unitary actor who make rational decisions based upon the structural constraint in particular power of distribution and the anarchic nature of the international system.¹¹ States, according to the rational actor model, calculate the consequences of their actions. Waltz, countering the critics, went on to argue further that it doesn't matter if the state is not theoretically unitary because there are enough people in the decision making process to conform to the rationality assumptions to allow us to conclude unitary preferences.¹² Waltz puts forth the need for second strike capability (mostly assured through the nuclear triad), arguing that both states must develop, not just the ability to inflict some level of unacceptable damage to the other side, but also a sufficient degree of second-strike survivability so that its forces could retaliate if attacked first. Also adding that nuclear weapons lower the stakes and intensity of war (in an unlikely scenario where deterrence fails) as well but albeit committing to the notion that deterrence minimizes irresponsible behavior unless threatened with survival.

When deterrence achieves stability, uncertainty decreases, thus minimizing the security paradox. States are assumed to behave rationally and make choices to maximize their gains and minimize losses, as a result, decreasing the chances of war. Opposed to this, in case of deterrence becoming unstable, the nuclear threshold declines making the probability of war a reality. Such a scenario results in a complex deterrence atmosphere, thereby increasing the risk of failure when an actor does not understand the adversary.¹³ In any event, many believe that the likelihood of deterrence failure has increased.

¹¹ Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Berkeley: Addison-Wesley Publishing, 1979), 118.

¹² Scott D. Sagan and Kenneth N. Waltz, *The spread of nuclear weapons; an enduring debate* (Stanford: W.W. Norton, 2002), 72.

¹³ Adam B. Lowther, "Introduction: How has Deterrence Evolved?" in *Deterrence: Rising Powers, Rogue Regimes & Terrorism in the 21st Century*, ed., A. B. Lowther (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 10.

Similarly, the case of South Asian strategic stability is under duress. The classic model of deterrence seems increasingly unable to counter the emerging trends and threats which undermine the stability of deterrence equation that exists between India and Pakistan. The Pulwama incident, subsequent clash between the respective air forces, and the annexation of Kashmir are the most recent series of events. Moreover, rising defence budgets and acquisition of new military hardware are disturbing trends which evidently have the potential to push South Asian region towards deterrence failure. Deterrence needs to be revisited and applied with a more holistic approach given that there are various factors and non-state actors which can undermine peace in South Asia.

Kashmir and the American Factor in South Asia

The modern-day nation-states of India and Pakistan were born out of conflict. The probability of a next clash could lead to disastrous consequences for two nuclear states. Moreover, the prevalence of emotive tendencies on either side can spiral into an all-out war very quickly undermining the rational deterrence stability and endangering the lives of millions and beyond.¹⁴

The people on both sides share a similar culture, overlapping socio-religious norms, multiculturalism, ethnic diversity, history, and geography. Moreover, both share the same problems such as poverty, malnutrition, and extremism and are amongst the most affected states due to climate change, yet the issues of high politics like nuclear deterrence and related determinants that dominate the headlines.

The hasty exit of the British from Indian subcontinent meant trouble for the new states. The arbitrary division was chaotic. The result of the 1947 partition meant bloodbath and that is what happened. There has been no peace since then. Millions of people

¹⁴ Tim Marshall, *Prisoners of Geography: Ten Maps That Tell You Everything You Need to Know About Global Politics* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2016), 173.

were displaced and killed. Women were raped on both sides. It was a Hobbesian classic of anarchy. Around a million people were killed and 15 million were displaced.¹⁵ The fact that the victims of the partition are yet to get justice while there is no chance of securing that in the near future, means that the lingering bitter memory of partition continues to haunt the bilateral relationship. There are, in particular, two events that have shaped and determined strategic stability in South Asia. First, the Kashmir issue, which continues till date and dictates the nature of relationship the two have developed. Second, the fall of Dhaka which led to two things: highlighted Pakistan's conventional inferiority compared to India, and the nuclearization of South Asia.

Kashmir has remained the primary venue for wars between the rival states. The princely state holds significance for both Pakistan and India due to religious, political, historical and symbolic factors.¹⁶ More than ideology or national prestige, Kashmir is important in strategic terms. Kashmir as Indian territory would allow India access to the Central Asian states and a border with Afghanistan which can be used to garner influence and undermine Pakistan. For Pakistan, Kashmir is the only land route to China, making Pakistan an integral part of the Rising China aspirations. Kashmir is also essential for both countries, especially Pakistan in terms of water security. The Indus River originates from the Tibetan region through the Indian Illegally Occupied Jammu & Kashmir (IIOJ&K) and runs along the country. Given Pakistan's agrarian economy, the river is the lifeline.

The first Indo-Pakistan war was fought in 1948, shortly after partition and as a consequence the Line of Control (LoC) as it is known today came into existence dividing Kashmir and making it one of the most militarized zones in the world. Soon after, in 1965, the second

¹⁵ Tim Marshall, *Prisoners of Geography*, 186.

¹⁶ Sumit Ganguly, *The Kashmir Question: Retrospect and Prospect* (London: Routledge, 2003), 96.

war over Kashmir was fought. As for Kashmir, minor skirmishes have continued ever since, like the one in the Siachen glacier in 1984, which is believed to be the highest battlefield at an altitude of 22,000 feet where the troops have remained stationed ever since.¹⁷ More concerning was the Kargil conflict in 1999, when both sides had openly confessed to having nuclear weapons the year before, making Kashmir a nuclear flashpoint. It was due to international pressure and in particular, the US' diplomatic intervention that both sides were able to climb down the escalation ladder. In the year 2001, following the Parliament attack in New Delhi,¹⁸ India accused Pakistan,¹⁹ leading to another military standoff that went on for months with sporadic fighting along the border. Even though Pakistan denied the allegations and facts proved it an Indian orchestrated act of terror,²⁰ there has been a constant military build-up along the border in particular the LoC ever since, on the premise of defence but nothing appears defensive rather the opposite.

The international community realizes that Kashmir is the root cause of tensions between the two countries and fear that the continued conflict over Kashmir may have severe impacts on stability of the region. Yet they have done little to bring the two sides to a mutually acceptable and lasting dialogue. There was a glimmer of hope in the mid-2000s when both sides were developing a working relationship and there was optimism that the dialogue will help reduce the trust deficit. Unfortunately, as has often been the case with India and Pakistan, the muddled diplomacy and hawkish thinking on each side got the better of things pushing the Kashmir issue to the back burner. Space for dialogue and cooperation was further strangled after

¹⁷ Tim Marshall, *Prisoners of Geography*, 190.

¹⁸ Jawed Naqvi, "12 die as gunmen storm Indian parliament," *DAWN*, December 14, 2001.

¹⁹ Jawed Naqvi, "Delhi blames Lashkar for attack: India wants militants' arrest," *DAWN*, December 15, 2001.

²⁰ "Indian govt behind parliament, Mumbai attacks, claims former CBI official," *DAWN*, July 14, 2013.

the 2008 Mumbai terror attacks.²¹ The 2016 Uri attack²² and Pulwama incident in 2019²³ again demonstrated the fragility of strategic stability in Indo-Pakistan relations. Furthermore, the unilateral decision of Indian government to repeal article 370 which previously gave IIOJ&K certain autonomy has further created an environment for increased tensions and possibility of violent attacks more certain. The continuing deployment of Indian armed forces to ensure order is counterproductive and misleading, as the armed forces are given legal impunity through draconian legislations such as Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) and Prevention of Terrorism Act 2002 (POTA) for their actions in the name of security has increased the gulf between the people of Kashmir and the Indian government. The recent events in Kashmir have demonstrated to the global community that it is not Pakistan's interference as India propagates, which causes these attacks but rather the self-defeating, short-sighted, and inhumane oppressive policies and tactics of the India government which make Kashmir bleed.

Another key determinant of the South Asian strategic environment is the role of external powers, in particular the US. Over the years Pakistan's relationship with the US has been unreliable and is reflective of American failure as a crisis manager in South Asia. The relationship grew out of the Cold War dynamics when Pakistan chose to join the Western bloc. Pakistan's reliance on an external power was understandable given its limited resources compared to India's and the initial setback in Kashmir dispute. The role of the US in light of the events of 1965 and 1971 led to a strong realization that Pakistan cannot solely rely upon any single great power. It was believed that the alliance with the US turned out to have more disadvantages rather

²¹Neil MacFarquhar, "India and Pakistan Fail to Restart Negotiations," *New York Times*, September 27, 2009.

²²"17 soldiers killed as suspected militants attack army base in India – held Kashmir," *DAWN*, September 18, 2016.

²³"Pulwama Attack," *DAWN*, February 16, 2019.

than advantages²⁴ given the latter's imposition of arms embargo after the 1965 war to appease India. This trend has remained more or less same ever since. Pakistan faced the Pressler amendment right after it helped the US defeat the Soviet Union successfully bringing the Cold War to an end for the US.²⁵ The trend continues till date as more recently there are voices in the US government demanding accountability and calling for sanctions against Pakistan following the events leading to the disastrous US-withdrawal from Afghanistan.²⁶

Similarly, the case of Indo-US nuclear deal reveals more than it conceals. Pakistan has strongly been critical of the Indo-US civil nuclear deal since it was signed in 2008.²⁷ One of the reasons for Pakistan's concerns with this deal is that it recognizes the status of India as a nuclear power but continues to exclude Pakistan from the nuclear club. The logic behind this, according to scholars, is the US strategic objectives with regard to China. The US intends to expand Indian military and economic capabilities in order to counterbalance rising China.²⁸ Pakistan's concerns are legitimate insofar as the stability of the region will be heavily destabilized, since it will allow India to carry civilian nuclear trade and in effect enhance the fissile material stockpile. Moreover, through this deal the US will no longer be seen as an honest broker in the South Asian crisis management and will push Pakistan more towards the Chinese camp which clearly does not fall in

²⁴ Rizwan Naseer and Mussarat Amin, "Dynamics of Balance of Power in South Asia: Implications for Regional Peace," *Berkeley Journal of Social Sciences*, Vol. 1, no. 1 (2011), 66.

²⁵ Bruce Riedel, "Pakistan's Role in the Afghan War's Outcome," (Washington DC: Brookings, May 20, 2010), Available at: <https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/pakistans-role-in-the-afghanistan-wars-outcome/> (accessed on 14 May 2021).

²⁶ Kenneth Mohanty, "Explained: Why Long-Time Ally Pakistan Is Facing US Sanctions Heat," *News 18*, October 3, 2021.

²⁷ Mateen Haider, "Indo-US nuclear deal will negatively impact South Asia: Sartaj Aziz," *DAWN*, January 27, 2015.

²⁸ Saira Bano, "Pakistan: Lessons from India-US Nuclear Deal," *The Diplomat*, June 22, 2015.

line with what the US wants vis-à-vis its China strategy. There seems to be a thaw in Pakistan-US relations in recent times especially under the Trump Administration due to the former's role in the US-Taliban talks,²⁹ but since the Biden Administration has taken the charge coupled with the chaotic albeit humiliating US withdrawal from Afghanistan has left the relationship sour to say the least.

Strategic (In)-Stability in South Asia: India's Ambitions and Pakistan's Response

It is quite clear that India and Pakistan can be brought to the brink of war by even a minor event. Keeping the Cold War under consideration, it can be said that an environment of mutual deterrence must be maintained between the two states to prevent a nuclear war in South Asia. The dynamics and conditions of a stable deterrence are very important in this particular case. Hence, the purpose of ensuring deterrence in the region is to prevent a war between the nuclear armed states.³⁰ As Dr. Riffat Hussain explains that deterrence is a time-buying strategy and describes the application of deterrence in South Asia as the 'rationality of irrationality,' reflecting the existence of non-rational factors and actors in South Asia. He further argues that one major factor is the existence of non-state actors which have repeatedly acted to spoil peace efforts as previously highlighted particularly in the context of Kashmir. The issue of non-state actors needs to be addressed as it carries huge potential to contribute to deterrence failure.³¹ Though others believe that by achieving mutual deterrence both India and Pakistan have reached a stage, where going for a war is not an option for resolving disputes. The reason for this restraint is

²⁹ Michael D. Shear and Salman Masood, "Trump Tries Cooling Tensions with Pakistan to Speed Afghan Peace Process," *The New York Times*, July 22, 2019.

³⁰ T. V. Paul, James J. Wirtz, and Michel Fortmann (eds.), *Balance of power; Theory and practice in the 21st century* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 313.

³¹ Riffat Hussain, "Deterrence Workshop," *talk delivered at CIPS, NUST, Islamabad*, December 31, 2019.

believed to be the nuclear status of both nations³² but that is increasingly becoming hard to sustain, as factors leading to instability are becoming more dominant as we shall discuss later in the paper.

Since India and Pakistan are nuclear-armed powers, instant and effective diplomatic interventions over the years have been made which prevented crises from erupting into major wars. Hence the argument that nuclear weapons brought stability in the region has a very logical conclusion that South Asia has not seen any all-out-war between India and Pakistan since 1971. According to scholars the nuclear deterrence prevented wars and led to negotiations like the ones witnessed in the Lahore summit of 1999 and Agra summit of 2001.³³ Unfortunately, the optimism in recent years has rather diminished given the enhancement in the already conflicting interests of the two nuclear armed neighbors.

A comparative analysis of the Indian and Pakistani interests in the region and globally, will reveal that India, given its growing power, seeks global status and recognition. India intends to revise the global and regional order through competition and assertive behavior,³⁴ whereas Pakistan's ambitions are calculated. Brig Zahir Kazmi argues that Pakistan seeks a solution-oriented revision of the regional setup. Pakistan seeks security on both its eastern and western borders and pursues a strategy of balancing against India. This has led to increased

³² Vipin Narang, "Pakistan's Nuclear Posture: Implications for South Asian Stability," (Cambridge: Belfer Center, January 2010), Available at: <https://www.belfercenter.org/publication/pakistans-nuclear-posture-implications-south-asian-stability#:~:text=Since%20Pakistan's%20adoption%20of%20an,shielded%20by%20Pakistan's%20nuclear%20posture> (accessed on 4 May 2021).

³³ Mohan Malik, "The Stability of Nuclear Deterrence in South Asia: The Clash between State and Anti-state Actors," *Asian Affairs: An American Review*, Vol. 30, no. 3 (2003), 179.

³⁴ Nicholas Miller, and Vipin Narang, "Is a New Nuclear Age upon us?", *Foreign Affairs*, December 31, 2019, Available at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2019-12-30/new-nuclear-age-upon-us> (accessed on 13 March 2021).

gulf between strategic and conventional capabilities and respective doctrines of both the states.³⁵

In terms of strategic capabilities, the Indian trajectory is in line with its desire to dominate the region and seek recognition globally. It has an established nuclear triad and an active space program to go along with it. India is fast expanding its fissile material capability, though the estimated nuclear arsenal count which stands at 130-140 does not accurately depict India's ability. India continues to produce fissile material for military purposes and more specifically naval propulsion. It operates a Uranium enrichment facility and plutonium production reactor, Dhruva which are not subject to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) safeguards. India, though not able to secure admission to the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG), continues to enjoy benefits due to the US-India nuclear deal, of which Pakistan remains critical due to its negative impact on strategic stability and potential reason for growing production of Indian fissile material.

India's strategic missile program has evolved over more than four decades as a consequence of which it has developed short, medium and long-range ballistic missiles. India did manage to become a member of the Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR) in 2016³⁶ which further boosted its missile capabilities. It has made the Indian missile system practically invulnerable to any disruption by export controls.³⁷ The most significant development was in the form of the much-famed BrahMos missile, developed by India after becoming a member of the MTCR reflecting another negative trend in the South Asian strategic stability. The BrahMos supersonic cruise missile is an outcome of the joint venture between India and Russia. It has

³⁵ Zahir Kazmi, "Deterrence as it is practiced in South Asia," "Deterrence Workshop," *talk delivered at CIPS, NUST, Islamabad*, December 31, 2019.

³⁶ "India Joins Elite Missile Control Group," *BBC News*, June 28, 2016.

³⁷ "India Missile Program," (Washington DC: Nuclear Threat Initiative, October 20, 2021), 65, Available at: <https://www.nti.org/learn/countries/india/delivery-systems/> (accessed on 3 June 2021).

established itself as the backbone of the Indian cruise missile program. BrahMos has a range of 300-500km along with its sea-air and submarine launched variants have also been developed.³⁸ The supersonic missile, which is equipped with advanced satellite navigation, can notch up speeds of Mach 3.0. There is ongoing collaboration between Russia and India to develop a hypersonic variant of the same which can notch speeds of Mach 5.0.³⁹

India has also significantly reinforced its submarine-launched ballistic missile (SLBM) capabilities. In 2013, India deployed Dhanush SLBM possessing a range of 400km⁴⁰ and continued further development in this regard. It deployed the K-15 ballistic missile to boost its SSBN fleet having a range of 700km in 2017.⁴¹ Simultaneously, India continues to develop its double-tiered Ballistic Missile Defence (BMD) system which is going to significantly alter the strategic balance. India has developed a wide array of Defence Vehicles (DV) able to intercept both exo-atmospheric and endo-atmospheric warheads.

Given the increased modernization of Indian defence spending and technological developments, it comes as no surprise that there has been an offensive shift in Indian doctrine as well. Though to begin with, the original stance of no-first use (NFU) of nuclear weapons was more of a rhetoric than reality. It is now clear that India is drifting away from its NFU policy and seeks conventional space to engage with Pakistan under the nuclear overhang, which is a serious threat to deterrence stability. The statement of India's Defence Minister is also significant,

³⁸ "Explained: As India Conducts Another Brahmos Test, all you need to know about supersonic cruise missile," *News 18*, January 11, 2022.

³⁹ "Missile Threat: Brahmos" (Washington DC: CISS Missile Defence Project, August 2, 2021), available at: <https://missilethreat.csis.org/missile/brahmos/> (accessed on 2 December 2021).

⁴⁰ Hans M. Kristensen and Robert S. Norris, "Indian Nuclear Forces 2015," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, Vol. 71, Issue 5(2015), 79.

⁴¹ H. K Rout, "Nuke-capable submarine-launched missile operationalized, India in select triad club," *The New Indian Express*, August 19, 2018.

arguing that Indian nuclear doctrine is circumstantial and the shifting away from NFU was part of the election manifesto of the ruling party.⁴²

As for Pakistan, it has maintained a policy of strategic restraint. In response to India's strategic prowess, it has maintained a modest triad with limited air and land strategic forces and with no nuclear powered or ballistic submarines. Nor does it possess a BMD program or Space launch vehicle capability either. Pakistan's fissile material capability is limited in nature when compared to India. Though Pakistan has developed Multiple Independent Re-entry Vehicles (MIRV) technology and Tactical Nuclear Weapons (TNWs) as a means to balance against Indian designs.

Pakistan maintains its Full-Spectrum Deterrence (FSD) policy in line with the credible minimum deterrence and aims to keep the nature of its doctrine dynamic rather than static given the evolving threat it faces from India. Pakistan seeks to enhance its conventional deterrence so that India can be denied any possible space for war. In short Pakistan's full spectrum deterrence will have to meet India's emerging full spectrum conflict posture.

In the recent events of Uri surgical strikes in 2016, Pakistan responded with restraint despite the vocal provocation from Indian side by blaming Pakistan for the attacks. This is the kind of the 'New Normal' India aims to seek. More alarming was the failed Balakot strike, where for the first time since 1971, the Indian Air force crossed into Pakistan's international border as a response to the terror attack on a military convoy in Pulwama in February 2019 killing 40 troops.⁴³ India accused Pakistan of facilitating the terror group Jaish-e-Mohammad (JEM) which Pakistan strongly denied. Pakistan rather

⁴² Julia Masterson, "India Considers No-First Use Changes," (Washington DC: Arms Control Today, 2019), Available at: <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2019-10/news-briefs/india-considers-first-use-changes> (accessed on 7 August 2021).

⁴³ Sana Ali, "Timeline: Events leading up to the Feb 2019 Pak-India aerial combat," *DAWN*, February 27, 2019.

insisted that India's Kashmir policy has contributed to radicalism in the Kashmiri youth ever since the Modi government has come to power and the terror act was indigenous rather than a case of cross-border terrorism. Pakistan once again responded with restraint but demonstrated resolve by downing an Indian aircraft and capturing the pilot.⁴⁴ To avoid further escalation, Pakistan returned the Indian pilot and demonstrated its commitment for peace in the region and its conventional prowess.⁴⁵

The most essential feature for the increasing arms race instability in South Asia is external in nature owing to the structural imbalance in the international system. India shares close defence and strategic ties with the US, Russia, France and Israel whereas Pakistan receives defence cooperation from primarily China and to a lesser extent, Turkey. This imbalance has also impacted the conventional domain as well which too exhibits a destabilizing trend. From 2012 till 2016, India was consistently the largest importer of major arms in the world with arms imports from US, Russia, France, Israel, South Korea and other countries. India stands as the second largest importer of arms and weapons in the world today, whereas Pakistan stands at 11 amongst the top arms importers. This trend has remained consistent in recent years coupled with India's defence budget which is a massive 62 billion USD compared to Pakistan's 11 billion USD in 2018-19. Moreover, India's force ratio ranking according to the Global Fire Power is four out of 140 states as compared to Pakistan's which stands at 10,⁴⁶ highlighting India's dominance in the conventional domain as well. In 2018, India signed an agreement with Russia to buy the Russian

⁴⁴ "Abhinandan: Who is the Indian pilot captured by Pakistan?" *BBC News*, March 1, 2019.

⁴⁵ Zulqernain Tahir, "Pakistan sends captured Indian pilot back home in a bid to defuse tension," *DAWN*, March 2, 2019.

⁴⁶ "World Military Strengths Comparison of India and Pakistan," *Global Firepower* (2021), Available at: <https://www.globalfirepower.com/countries-comparison-detail.php?form=form&country1=india&country2=pakistan&Submit=COMPARE> (accessed on 2 September 2021).

S-400 air defence missile system which will be a major boost to its conventional standing. India also purchased 36 French Rafale fighter jets as part of its efforts to modernize its air force.

Indeed, the possession of an assured nuclear capability has changed the nature of threat emanating from the eastern flank. However, the ongoing non-kinetic war, developments, trends, and trajectories although cannot be labeled as a failure of deterrence theory but does pose a serious challenge to its assumptions. Pakistan's nuclear posture intends to make the pursuance of a military option against Pakistan untenable for India.

Ultimately deterrence is a time-buying and perceptive strategy which needs to be reinforced given the threat. In the dyadic deterrence scenario during the Cold War, achieving the prerequisites was complex, but manageable. This was because the deterrence relationship between the USSR and NATO at the time was fundamentally based on a shared normative framework.⁴⁷ Presumably, the classical deterrence formula of "assured destruction" functioned because it was clearly understood by both sides, but the question remains as to whether India and Pakistan understand the consequences of deterrence failure or irrational behavior?

There are concerns, both theoretical and practical, which will need answering especially given the current scenario in South Asia. How does one deter irrational decisions or statements? Referring to Modi's "Night of Murder" after Pakistan response to Balakot strike? Is the madman theory valid? How does one coerce a nuclear actor? It could be deterred but compellence can result in deterrence failure. Compellence is the opposite of deterrence, in which the actions are intended to prevent an opponent from taking some action. Dr. Riffat Hussain, observes that in the South Asian context and argues that a

⁴⁷ Tim Prior, "Resilience: The 'Fifth Wave' in the Evolution of Deterrence," in *Strategic Trends 2018 eds.*, Oliver Thrant and Martin Zapfe (Zurich: Center for Security Studies, 2018), 18.

nuclear actor could be deterred via deterrence but in the case of South Asia the use of compellence as means of strategy⁴⁸ has also been observed which can lead to dangerous consequences. Moreover, the negative role of media on either side, for invoking negative tendencies makes a bad situation worse, he argues.

The Way forward

The lack of political will coupled with geostrategic compulsions are the main hurdles in the way for lasting peace in South Asia. The dynamics and events in South Asia continue to evolve and are reasons for persistent pessimism. Any crisis can become the 1962 Cuban missile crisis moment for South Asia. The rise of global power competition and unresolved disputed territories continue to make South Asia one of the most unstable regions in the world today.⁴⁹

Both India and Pakistan need to find a mechanism to address the destabilizing role of non-state actors which have time and again demonstrated their ability to escalate tensions between the two and have negatively affected deterrence stability. Last but not the least, the role of media on either side of the border needs to be revisited. The war hysteria and irresponsible statements by the media fraternity, especially by the Indian media during the February 2019 crisis was no less than beating of war drums and manipulating the already emotive tendencies of their audiences. Rather the media and the civil society must play their positive part in developing a rational discourse on the deterrence stability of South Asia.

While the two countries have maintained the ceasefire for much of 2021, the situation is still far from stable even though there are four arms control related bilateral agreements including the India-

⁴⁸Riffat Hussain, "Deterrence Workshop," *talk delivered at CIPS, NUST, Islamabad*, December 31, 2019.

⁴⁹Imran Hassan, "Strategic Stability & Restraint in South Asia," *South Asian Voices*, July 22, 2021.

Pakistan non-attack agreement on nuclear installations and facilities, which was signed on 31st December 1988.⁵⁰ The annual exchanges of the list of nuclear installations and facilities in Pakistan and India is still being practiced since 1992.⁵¹ The agreement requires both sides to inform each other of their nuclear installations at the start of each year.

Despite the above-mentioned exchanges and agreements, there is a lack of a robust arms control framework between India and Pakistan.⁵² The existing confidence building measures are aging and may not prevent a breakdown of nuclear deterrence.⁵³ India's Cold Start Doctrine (CSD),⁵⁴ and offensive posturing against Pakistan, intend to seek space for a limited conventional war under the nuclear overhang, carries serious risk of escalation to nuclear level.⁵⁵ The prospects of long-lasting peace in South Asia depends upon a Strategic Restraint Regime (SRR), which is composed of (but not limited to) mechanisms for conflict resolution, nuclear restraint, and preserving a manageable conventional military parity.⁵⁶ Pakistan has adopted a policy of restraint in maintaining strategic stability and largely responded to the offensive posturing of the Indian side. Pakistan's logic

⁵⁰ Government of Islamic Republic of Pakistan and Government of the Republic of India, "Agreement on the Prohibition of Attack Against Nuclear Installations and Facilities," (Islamabad), December 31, 1988.

⁵¹ Amir Altif, "Pakistan, India Exchange Lists of Nuclear Facilities," *Anadolu Agency*, January 1, 2022.

⁵² Imran Hassan, "South Asian arms control and Pakistan's nuclear diplomacy." *International Institute for Strategic Studies Webinar*, 25:00, June 23, 2020, Available at: <https://www.iiss.org/events/2020/06/south-asian-arms-control-and-pakistans-nuclear-diplomacy> (accessed on 11 September 2021).

⁵³ Michael Krepon, "South Asia Confidence-Building Measures (CBM) Timeline," (Washington DC: Stimson Centre, April 17, 2017), Available at: <https://www.stimson.org/2017/south-asia-confidence-building-measures-cbm-timeline/> (accessed on 11 September 2021).

⁵⁴ Walter C. Ladwig, "A Cold Start for Hot Wars? The Indian Army's New Limited War Doctrine", *International Security*, Vol. 32, no. 3, (2007), 180.

⁵⁵ Ali Ahmed, "Understanding India's Land Warfare Doctrine," *South Asian Voices*, February 26, 2019.

⁵⁶ Imran Hassan, South Asian arms control and Pakistan's nuclear diplomacy," 2020.

of acquiring nuclear weapons was only for the purpose of defence. The core of Pakistan's nuclear policy can be summed up as India centric due to Indian hegemonic ambitions in South Asia and attempts to undermine Pakistan.

Pakistan reiterated its call for an SRR in South Asia in October 2020 at the United Nations (UN) session.⁵⁷ Reverting back to a SRR would also offer a practical option to address emerging technologies which are adding a fresh layer of complexity to strategic stability in South Asia and in effect undermining it. It would be idealistic to contemplate peace and stability in South Asia without resolving or even taking steps to calm the situation, territorial disputes, in particular Kashmir, agreeing on reciprocal measures for nuclear restraint, and developing a mechanism to bring parity between the respective armed forces. This can only be accomplished through a persistent process of dialogue and realization that such mutual restraint is in the self-interest of both sides. The introduction of disruptive technologies in the region such as hypersonic glide vehicles,⁵⁸ Ballistic Missile Defence systems (BMDs), canisterization of ballistic missiles such as Agni-V,⁵⁹ space weaponization of South Asia, and the nuclearization of the Indian Ocean⁶⁰ collectively have the potential to significantly undermine deterrence stability in the region.

The SRR paves a pathway for managing tensions between India and Pakistan without radically compromising on national interests; rather this offers them to enhance national security by minimizing the risk of a nuclear arms race thereby ensuring a stable deterrence.⁶¹

⁵⁷Anwar Iqbal, "Offer for strategic restraint still on table, Pakistan tells UN," *Dawn*, October 16, 2020.

⁵⁸Samran Ali, "Indian Hypersonic Weapons Bring New Challenges to South Asia. Nuclear Issues," *South Asian Voices*, September 13, 2019.

⁵⁹A. Afzal, "India conducts canister-based test firing of Agni-V ballistic missile," *Army Technology*, December 11, 2018.

⁶⁰Ibid.

⁶¹Shahzad Chaudhry, "Strategic Restraint," *The News*, March 16, 2016.

More importantly it offers an opportunity to both states to reduce reliance on external powers. The restraint regime has three core-meshed elements: conflict resolution, nuclear and missile restraint, and conventional balance, which should be pursued simultaneously owing to the interconnected nature of the mechanisms. India, however, driven by ambitions of global power status and de-hyphenation with Pakistan, remains unenthusiastic to engage on these mechanisms.⁶² Yet ironically its very aspirations depend upon the resolution of these regional disputes and imbalances.

The hereditary Kashmir issue remains the bone of contention between India and Pakistan, unless both work towards finding a practical yet acceptable solution for all, peace in the region will remain mythical. Similarly, the conventional disparity becomes a crucial driver for the increase in nuclear weapons in the region and strategic instability. Cold War history is also an evidence that arms control arrangements help reduce tensions. It can also reduce the trust deficits between rival states enabling them to understand each other's perspective better. This would increase the prospects for long-term peace. Pakistan's proposal for restraint outlines the essential framework for comprehensive peace and stability in the region.⁶³ Alternatively the absence of a restraint regime will push South Asia towards instability.

⁶²Srinath Raghavan, "Modi must make sure Trump's US doesn't hyphenate India & Pakistan again", *The Print*, August 27, 2019.

⁶³Imran Hassan, "Strategic Stability & Restraint in South Asia," *South Asian Voices*, July 22, 2021.

