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Strategic Vision Institute (SVI)

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SVI Foresight

SVI Foresight is a monthly electronic journal. It has a multi-disciplinary perspective highlighting contemporary strategic and security studies. The Journal is envisioned to be a collection of policy-oriented articles written by the SVI Research Officers, Visiting Faculty, and professional experts. The objective is to provide the readership with a concise all-around and real-time policy-oriented discourse on contemporary strategic regional and international developments, highlighting their relevance to Pakistan.

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Editor's Note

SVI Foresight for the month of May is unique in a sense that it brings to its readers an extensive analysis of the 25 years of nuclearization of South Asia. The short analytical commentaries made by various scholars in this issue specifically address this major milestone. Not only the inevitability of the nuclear tests for Pakistan is reflected upon but also how the nuclear weapons have established the much-needed deterrence equilibrium in South Asia. 28th May marks the “historic milestone” of Pakistan’s successful and calculated response to counter India’s aggression through operational preparedness of the Strategic Forces to maintain peace and stability. Moreover, Pakistan’s peaceful nuclear program is a great success story, encompassing decades of dedication, commitment, and integrated efforts of Pakistan’s polity, which has been highlighted by scholars.

Moreover, in the contemporary international security system, states are operating in a system characterized by anarchy, competition, and uncertainty where states lack mutual trust and to ensure their survival, the state has to follow the principle of self-help. the value of possession of nuclear weapon is evident in Ukraine case, which has been analyzed.

The issue further entails the current happenings around the world which directly or indirectly effects Pakistan. The role of Pakistan in Iran-Afghanistan border skirmishes from blowing out as it would result in further unrest in Pakistan. Another issue to counter the growing propaganda for abetting India has been discussed. India is unlikely to act against China at the behest of us until and unless its own interests are directly at stake, India however, wants to use the narrative of its weakness against China to pull out maximum concessions from Washington. The readers will undoubtedly find the analysis provided herein exceptionally valuable.

Furthermore, the Kremlin drone attack and two conflicting narratives attached to it have been discussed, as to whether the attack was a Ukrainian assassination attempt on President Putin and a major escalation of the war or there isn’t any Ukrainian involvement as President Volodymyr Zelenskyy says, moreover, the impact of emerging technologies in warfare and lessons for Pakistan has been discussed.

India has developed a reputation for deceiving its allies and foes altogether. Recently, Indian former naval officers were arrested for spying on Qatar’s secret submarine program for Israel. This is not the only incident where Indian spies were apprehended on foreign land; there

have been incidents in the past where Indian nationals, including military personnel, were arrested on espionage charges. An apt analysis on the repercussions of the reprehensible act has been discussed in the issue.

It is hoped that this issue will help readers in staying updated with the current strategic environment and they will find the analyses useful. The *SVI Foresight* team invites and highly encourages contributions from the security and strategic community in the form of opinion-based short commentaries on contemporary political, security, nuclear, and strategic issues. Any suggestions for further improvements are welcome. Please see [here](#) the copy of the *SVI Foresight* electronic journal. You can find us on [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#) and can also access the SVI [website](#).

Amber Afreen Abid
Editor, SVI Foresight

Pakistan's Pursuit of Maintaining Strategic Balance in South Asia

Sher Bano

The nuclear tests conducted on May 28, 1998, were a pivotal moment in Pakistan's history. This day serves as a reminder of Pakistan's resolve to ensure its national security, uphold deterrence, and foster regional stability. In the face of external security challenges, Pakistan demonstrated its determination to safeguard its sovereignty and maintain a balance of power in South Asia. These tests were not meant to instigate an arms race but were a necessary response to regional dynamics and the imperative of self-defense. From that day forward, Pakistan has remained committed to responsible nuclear practices and promoting peace.

Pakistan has long recognized the significance of maintaining a strategic balance in the region. With a history of conflicts and simmering tensions with its neighbor, India, Pakistan's pursuit of strategic equilibrium is rooted in the need to ensure its national security and safeguard regional stability. By carefully managing its military capabilities and diplomatic engagements, Pakistan endeavors to maintain a delicate balance that serves as a deterrent against aggression while fostering opportunities for peace and cooperation. Pakistan's pursuit of strategic balance rests on the principle of credible

minimum deterrence. Recognizing the imbalance in conventional military capabilities vis-à-vis its larger neighbor, Pakistan sought to develop a robust nuclear deterrent to dissuade potential aggression. The possession of nuclear weapons acts as a shield against external threats, reinforcing stability and preventing large-scale conflicts in the region. Pakistan's commitment to deterrence is not a belligerent stance but a pragmatic approach to maintaining peace and security.

The primary reason for Pakistan's cautious approach towards non-proliferation, disarmament, and arms control agreements stems from the hostility exhibited by India. Indian hostility has had a significant impact on Pakistan's willingness to engage in these agreements. Pakistan has consistently expressed its readiness to sign international non-proliferation agreements, provided that India reciprocates this commitment. For instance, Pakistan on three separate occasions between 1984 and 1987, offered to sign the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) with joint or bilateral agreements that encompassed full-scope inspections and safeguards. Unfortunately, India rejected this proposal. Furthermore, Pakistan has been historically supportive of the objectives of the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty (CTBT). However, due to India's growing capabilities, such as Submarine-Launched Ballistic Missiles (SLBMs), Cruise Missiles

(CMs), and Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles (ICBMs), Pakistan was unable to sign the treaty. India's reasoning for not signing the CTBT was that it restricts any kind of explosive tests and limits the development of nuclear weapons. Similarly, Pakistan faced challenges in signing the Fissile Material Cut-off Treaty (FMCT) due to the relative nuclear stockpile disparity with India, which would have put Pakistan at a disadvantageous position. Pakistan has proposed that the FMCT should also include the existing stockpile of fissile material, a position supported by various countries in the past.

Pakistan recognizes that sustainable peace can only be achieved through dialogue and confidence-building measures (CBMs). It has consistently advocated for meaningful negotiations with India to address outstanding disputes, particularly the Kashmir issue. The initiation of Track II diplomacy, exchange programs, and the establishment of nuclear risk reduction centers highlight Pakistan's commitment to resolving conflicts through peaceful means. The pursuit of CBMs fosters trust, reduces the chances of misunderstandings, and lays the foundation for a durable peace in the region. Pakistan had also proposed various Confidence Building Measures (CBMs) at the regional level. For instance, in 1974 Pakistan had proposed to make South Asia a nuclear-weapon-free zone (NWFZ), in 1978 proposal for the joint Indo-Pak declaration renouncing the manufacture and acquisition of nuclear

weapons was presented. Similarly, in 1979 Pakistan had proposed the mutual inspection of each other's nuclear facilities to build confidence and promote transparency. In 1988 Pakistan had proposed a bilateral treaty to ban the nuclear tests to elude overt nuclearization and reduce the nuclear risk. With the high risk attached to the emerging technologies and delivery systems, in 1994 Pakistan had proposed the South Asia zero-missile zone. Hence over the period, Pakistan has continued its efforts towards nuclear CBMs by proposing various regional and bilateral non-proliferation initiatives. These were aimed at strengthening strategic stability and to reduce the risk of any nuclear conflict in the region. Unfortunately, India has always shown a negative attitude to all such proposals and disrupted various technical, political, and strategic level talks on nuclear CBMs.

Pakistan has consistently demonstrated responsible nuclear stewardship, recognizing its role as a custodian of nuclear weapons. The nation upholds strict safety and security protocols, ensuring that its nuclear arsenal remains out of the reach of unauthorized actors. Pakistan's commitment to non-proliferation is reflected in its comprehensive export control regime and cooperation with international organizations. The country's responsible behavior in managing its nuclear program underscores its dedication to global peace and stability.

Pakistan's pursuit of strategic balance in the region reflects its commitment to national security and regional stability. By maintaining credible minimum deterrence, upholding responsible nuclear stewardship, engaging in dialogue, and seeking international cooperation, Pakistan aims to reinstate a stable regional nuclear order. This would likely serve the key to enduring peace and stability. Despite India's perilous and pessimist role in the non-proliferation realm, Pakistan should continue to act responsibly and maintain a constructive and responsible nuclear diplomacy.

<https://www.eurasiareview.com/26052023-pakistans-pursuit-of-maintaining-strategic-balance-in-south-asia-oped/>

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25 Years of Nuclear Pride

Amber Afreen Abid

India tried to disturb the South Asian stability on May 11, 1998, and conducted nuclear tests in Pokhran range of Rajasthan state, which borders Pakistan's southern Sindh province. The Indian nuclear tests came as a shock to the world, but not to Pakistan, which always showed concerns over India's growing nuclear potential. India, however, celebrated the tests and even started threatening Pakistan. The India home minister LK Advani while making aggressive remarks about Pakistan said that "Islamabad should realize the change in the geo-strategic situation in the region and the world (and) roll back its anti-India policy" adding that "it will prove costly". Moreover, he also stated that India's decisive step to become a nuclear state "has brought about a qualitatively new stage in Indo-Pakistan relations".

In such a scenario, when the nuclear weapons were in the hands of revisionist regime with hegemonistic ambitions, along with the statements that came after Indian nuclear tests, persuaded the Defence Committee of the Pakistan Cabinet to approve the nuclear test.

Pakistan always carries the onus of stabilizing the region, and conducted the nuclear test to restore balance of power in the region. Pakistan conducted five nuclear tests at Ras Koh, Chagai, codenamed Chagai-I. Two days later, Pakistan conducted another

test, this time in Kharan, codenamed Chagai-II. With six tests done on May 28 and May 30, 1998, Pakistan completed its hot-test validation of devices of different designs. Since then, Pakistan has not hot-tested any other nuclear device, though it has steadily improved its missile capability, and has the most reliable carriers for nuclear warheads.

Every year, May 28 serves as a solemn reminder of Pakistan's desire for peace as well as the nation's unswerving resolve to defend its territorial integrity, sovereignty and independence. It is the day when Allah Almighty blessed the Pakistani Nation in making its defence impregnable. Pakistan established Credible Minimum Deterrence and restored the balance of power in the region. Pakistan lacks strategic depth, hence the reliance on nuclear weapons ensures its national defence. Nuclear deterrence has stabilized the region, which earlier was in favor of India due to conventional asymmetry. In the post-nuclearization scenario, despite the huge conventional asymmetries between Pakistan and India, nuclear deterrent capability of both states refrains them from using war as an instrument of national policy.

Pakistan places high importance on developing, managing and securing the nuclear weapons, and has focused on the robust comprehensive operationalized capability. On February 2, 2000 the National Security Council approved the creation of National Command Authority (NCA). The

NCA is responsible for nuclear strategic policy formulation and exercises control over the employment and development of all strategic nuclear forces and strategic organizations. Pakistan has Full Spectrum Deterrence posture, under the auspices of Credible Minimum Deterrence. Adoption of full-spectrum deterrence was aimed at putting additional layers of defence against the variety of challenges posed at different threat spectrums.

Moreover, Pakistan's peaceful nuclear program is a great success story, encompassing decades of dedication, commitment, and integrated efforts of Pakistan's polity. Pakistan has realized the true potential of the appliance of peaceful aspects of nuclear energy in numerous domains, including health, medicine, agriculture, the environment, and electricity generation. Pakistan has a long experience of utilizing the potential of nuclear energy for peaceful purposes and is complementing the energy mix of the country. The clean history of the utilization of nuclear energy is an indication of Pakistan's commitment towards the utilization of nuclear power for peaceful purposes.

Pakistan has proved itself to be a responsible nuclear state and has an impeccable record of maintaining the safety and security of its nuclear infrastructure. Pakistan is a distinguished member of the IAEA and has served in the board of governors twenty-one times and chaired it twice, which shows the

recognition of credentials of Pakistan as a responsible nuclear state. Pakistan gives utmost importance to the security of its nuclear infrastructure, and not a single affair of theft of nuclear material has ever taken place.

Moreover, Pakistan has no intention of indulging into an arms race with its adversary, and the weapons are purely for the security purposes. In order to give a pivotal response to enemy, a country should be equipped with latest technology. The successful nuclear weapon test of Pakistan has successfully balanced the conventional parity in the region, and the Pakistani nation celebrates this success with dignity and pride.

<https://strategic-times.com/blog/2023/05/29/25-years-of-nuclear-pride/>

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25 years on, Tracking Path to South Asia's Nuclearization

Hamdan Khan

May 2023 marks the Silver Jubilee of the overt nuclearization of South Asia. In May 1998, India carried out a series of nuclear tests, and unlike in 1974 — when it used the euphemism “Smiling Buddha” to describe what it claims to be a peaceful nuclear explosion — it declared itself a nuclear weapons state. Subsequently, India's arch-rival to the East, Pakistan, was compelled to undertake remedial measures to restore the strategic balance in the region.

What prompted India to conduct nuclear tests in 1974 and 1998 has long been debated. India cites the threat from China — which defeated India in a 1962 border war and demonstrated nuclear capability in 1964 — and the arrival of the USA's 7th fleet in the Bay of Bengal during the 1971 Indo-Pakistan war as the justifications for conducting nuclear explosion in 1974.

However, it is worth noting that China declared a “No First Use” (NFU) policy from the very onset, and post-1962, the relationship between India and China did not deteriorate to erupt into hostilities again. Likewise, the sailing of the US Naval Task Force was neutralized by the posturing of the Pacific fleet of the Soviet Union — which signed a treaty of friendship and cooperation with India in August 1971, essentially bequeathing India with a security umbrella.

Furthermore, if the 1974 explosion had a security rationale, why did the Indira Gandhi government declare it a peaceful nuclear explosion? They could have acknowledged it as a nuclear weapon test, which would have better served the purpose of deterring the security threats that India was supposedly facing. Instead, New Delhi employed the term “peaceful nuclear explosion”, arguably to assuage international opprobrium that resulted from India carrying out a nuclear explosion.

So, what motivated Indira Gandhi's government to conduct a nuclear explosion in 1974?

First, it was India's long-held desire for global status. Considering India the rightful heir to the British Empire in South Asia, the early Indian leadership sought an influential status on the world stage — a desire inherited by the successors like Indira Gandhi. New Delhi chose its constituency among the third-world countries, wherein it claimed leadership status. Given most of the countries wielding influence on the international stage were part of the exclusive nuclear club, the demonstration of nuclear capability was seen as complementing the Indian aspiration for status on the world stage.

Secondly, despite decisively winning a war against the arch-rival Pakistan in 1971, the Indira government encountered a massive domestic upheaval during the early 1970s, which culminated in the imposition of an emergency in 1975. Resulting of Indira's

authoritarian style of government and the breakdown of governance, the cacophony of mass protests and movements was amplified by a constitutional crisis, which induced Prime Minister Indira Gandhi to seek retreat behind the nationalism stirred by the nuclear explosion — in effect aiming to cash in the dividends of the nuclear explosion in the domestic political arena.

Pakistan, on the other hand, never had any status-driven ambitions but endured under the perennial threat emanating from a many times bigger adversary — India. Initially, it endeavoured external balancing by signing the SEATO and CENTO pacts, which enabled the acquisition of crucial military support from the United States, but the undependability of the defence pacts became evident during the 1965 and 1971 wars with India. The latter particularly proved to be a turning point: driven by the “never again” pledge, Pakistani decision-makers sought internal balancing to avert a repeat of the 1971 debacle, wherein the nuclear route was considered the most viable option. The 1974 nuclear explosion by India only reinforced the resolve of Pakistani leadership to acquire nuclear capability and subsequently strenuous efforts and tremendous resources were dedicated to mastering the complex nuclear weapons technology.

Fast forward to 1998, India did not face an immediate or even distant security threat, which could have provided a plausible rationale for the nuclear tests and declaring

itself a nuclear weapon state. Although the Indian PM Vajpayee later cited threats from China and Pakistan to justify nuclear tests, the empirical evidence suggests otherwise. By 1998, the relationship with China had been stable for years, and despite tensions with Pakistan, the conventional military balance tilted decisively in India’s favour. However, the BJP — which led a fragile coalition government after 1998 polls — had an avowed agenda of reviving the splendour of Hindu antiquity and knotted nuclear weapons with their Hindu revivalist ambitions in the same way congress leaders linked nukes with India’s status at the global high table.

BJP’s 1998 elections manifesto promised to “reevaluate” India’s nuclear policy and “exercise the option to induct nuclear weapons”. In less than two months after winning the elections, the Vajpayee-led BJP government conducted nuclear tests and proclaimed India a nuclear weapons state. The subsequent posturing by the BJP leadership proved going nuclear had little to do with supposed security threats and was mostly about Hindu revivalism and regional hegemony. Moreover, the Vajpayee government found a quick solution in nuclear tests to weather the brewing storm in the ruling coalition, which started developing fissures soon after its formation.

After India declared its nuclear weapons status, Pakistan did not have much space to manoeuvre except to respond in kind.

Pakistan had a plausible security rationale to carry out its nuclear tests and a choice to act otherwise would also have rendered Pakistan a perennial subject to India's nuclear coercion, which augmented by India's massive conventional military advantage could have created existential security threats for Pakistan — exactly the nightmarish scenario Pakistani leadership wanted to forestall when it chose the nuclear path. Hence, Pakistan's decision to conduct nuclear tests not only restored the strategic balance in the region but also thanks to the viability of nuclear deterrence, South Asia has not seen an outbreak of hostilities from that moment on.

<https://ibcenglish.net/25-years-on-tracking-path-to-south-asias-nuclearization/>

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Ukraine-Disarmament for Vulnerable State

Noreen Iftakhar

The advent of nuclear weapons was a turning point not only for the American defense policy but it managed to reshape the paradigm of the international security system. Due to its deterrence effects, nuclear weapons became a decisive factor in America's relations with other states.

Later, when more countries joined the nuclear club during the cold war, it became imperative that nuclear weapons will influence international discourse. However, with the end of the cold war and bipolar system in 1990, the international security order under the USA as a superpower triumphed in uni-polarity international cooperation through multilateral economic and diplomatic forums, shared threat perception, common responsibility, collective security, etc... all the faBy Noreen Iftakhar ncy words. It was advocated to smaller nations that you don't need to worry about your security.

Extended deterrence and collective security echoed more frequently. The newly established states, after the disintegration of the USSR, were given security assurance. These states were assured that since the major threat (USSR) was removed, so abandon the nuclear weapons that were kept by USSR at places that later became independent states. Three states that inherited Soviet nuclear weapons included Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Ukraine. These states gave up their nuclear weapons on the condition of security guarantee and economic assistance.

Three factors played a significant role in these states' decision to abandon nuclear weapons capability: considerable financial compensation, security guarantees from other nuclear states, and the need to establish political ties with the West. All this resulted in the Budapest Memorandums on Security Assurance signed in 1994, under which Ukraine abandoned its nuclear weapons by joining the Treaty on the Nonproliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) as a non-nuclear weapons state. In return USA, the UK, and Russia are committed to respecting the territorial integrity of Ukraine. Three states also pledged to refrain from the use or threat of military force against Ukraine.

This led to a new debate in security studies that if given a security guarantee, the state can relinquish its nuclear weapons capability, or once the threat has disappeared state should disarm. But events occurring in Ukraine, first as the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014 and now the Russian attempt on the Ukrainian mainland, revived the realist paradigm which believes that the system or structure is anarchic and is based on self-help. It cannot be concluded that once the threat has vanished, the state should disarm.

In the contemporary international security system, states are operating in a system characterized by anarchy, competition, and uncertainty where states lack mutual trust and to ensure their survival, the state has to follow the principle of self-help. Thus the state is the only referent object whose security needs protection and other objects or non-traditional security threats emanate from within states located in some specified territory. A wave of globalization can be seen worldwide but also the trends of nationalism

are obvious too. In such a world where the security of nuclear weapons states is interlinked and interconnected, can nuclear states disarm unilaterally? Nuclear disarmament is primarily meant to eliminate nuclear weapons yet not to curb the reasons which led to their development.

In the realist world, until trust deficit and security dilemma exist between the states, they will try to maximize their power with nuclear weapons. Furthermore, until regional rivalries and conflicts amongst regional and global powers remain, the goal of nuclear disarmament continues to be unachievable. The recent Ukraine crisis will have a long-lasting impact on the global nuclear nonproliferation regime. It might give a jerk to the 'noble cause' of the Treaty on Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) and the overall disarmament debate. Had Ukraine been equipped with nuclear weapons capability, the situation would have been

different and the country would have a better bargaining position.

Three major takeaways of this crisis are: vulnerable states may regret surrendering nuclear weapons; the efficacy of extended deterrence will continue to be doubted; and more countries will see nuclear arms as their guarantee of security. Thus, it is safe to assume the Ukraine crisis is an indicator of the prospective value of nuclear weapons. In addition, this crisis has also weakened the disarmament plea. It has reinforced the realist paradigm that in the contemporary international security environment, states are operating in a system characterized by anarchy, competition and uncertainty where states lack mutual trust and the ultimate driving force is survival.

<http://theislamabadtelegraph.com/2023/05/ukraine-disarmament-for-peace/>

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Iran-Taliban skirmishes and Pakistan's 'Afghanistan conundrum'

Akash Shah

Taliban and Iran border police had yet another bloody clash at the border along Nimroz province of Afghanistan. Reportedly, 2 Iranian border police personnel and one Talib has been killed. Both sides have blamed each other to be the instigator of the conflict and subsequently, both sides have stressed that matters need to be dealt via peaceful dialogue.

It marks the third major scruffle between the two sides ever since the Taliban took the reins of power in August 2021. Recently, Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi warned the Taliban not to violate the 1973 agreement for the water distribution of the Helmand River and give his country its due share as per the agreement. Afghanistan has built a dam to store the water, for electricity generation and irrigation purposes, on the Helmand River.

A Perpetual Conflict in Sight

Iran has been experiencing drought for the past 30 years and the condition has worsened in the last decade particularly. As much as 97% of the country is said to be undergoing some level of drought-like situation. Given the climate change that has been particularly hard in the region, the water situation is expected to deteriorate further leading to more bloody clashes in the future. It is because of the nature of the problem, the very

existence of people at stake, that President Ebrahim Raisi did not mince words when he threatened the Taliban regime and told them to take his words seriously when he said, “We will not allow the rights of our people to be violated.”

Similarly, Afghanistan under the Taliban is unlikely to tackle the looming water crisis due to insufficient economic and human resources. The water issue is not regime specific as there appears to be a rare convergence between the incumbent Taliban regime's policy and former President Ashraf Ghani's stance over the matter as well.

Back in 2021, during the inauguration of Kamal Khan Dam on the Helmand River, President Ghani said that Afghanistan would no longer give free water to anyone, so Iran should provide fuel to Afghans in exchange for water. As per the 1973 agreement that Iran keeps referring to, Afghanistan has the sole ownership of the river water however Iran would get an annual share of 850 million cubic meters of water.

Despite all his flaws, President Ghani was the closest to what may be termed as a 'statesman' that Afghanistan got since the U.S. invasion. The sentiments coming from President Ghani, who has previously worked at the World Bank and understands the significance of bilateral agreements between the states, exemplify that the water issue has a nationalist fervor to it along with the obvious need for the resource.

Hence, the Taliban who are already finding it difficult to land on their feet as statesmen as per international standards and failing to secure the much-needed formal recognition from the international community are unlikely to back down. As per the latest reports, the Taliban are moving APCs, left after the U.S. withdrawal, and more personnel to the Iranian border suggesting that at least in their wargaming the conflict is going to linger on.

Pakistan's Conundrum

President Raisi chose the occasion of the Mand-Pishin border market inauguration at the Pakistan-Iran border along with Prime Minister Shahbaz Sharif to threaten the Taliban regarding the water dispute. The signaling is significant as it implied that Pakistan ought to play its role to make the Taliban comply with the water agreement through its influence.

However, the assessment has two fundamental and historic inconsistencies. During their insurgency years, Pakistan was not the only country in the region having a backchannel connection with the Taliban. In fact, Iran itself was actively engaging with the Taliban during this time to the extent that the last Emir of the Afghan Taliban Mullah Akhtar Mansoor was targeted in a drone strike on his way back from Iran.

Secondly, since coming to power in 2021, the Taliban have proven that previous relations do not account for much as they have pursued

their policies based on their own interest and domestic political needs. Hence, expecting Pakistan to mediate or pave the way for any peaceful settlement as the signaling suggests, would not be prudent for both Pakistan and Iran who have their own share of distrust and insurgency-related problems along the Sistan-Balochistan region.

Furthermore, Pakistan has been unable to leverage the communication it had with the Taliban during the U.S. war in Afghanistan to mitigate its own TTP threat as it was much anticipated. And no country is in a better position to understand the dynamics than Iran.

Pakistan and Iran have only started to come out of the shadow of Saudi-Iran thorny relations over the decades, courtesy of the deal between the latter mediated by China. Pakistan's western front has been in unrest for a long time now and a small window has appeared where both Iran and Pakistan can amicably overcome their differences. Hence it should not be compromised by unrealistic expectations.

Pakistan, of course, will have to play a part, in whatever capacity, to keep the conflict between Iran and Afghanistan from blowing out as it would result in further unrest in Pakistan as well but there is still a limit to Pakistan's influence over Taliban. Eventually, it is Iran and Afghanistan who have to diplomatically carve out a workable solution through diplomacy as both sides have indicated.

<https://www.globalvillagespace.com/iran-taliban-skirmishes-and-pakistans-afghanistan-conundrum/>

Akash Shah (Research officer, Strategic Vision Institute, Islamabad.)

Dissecting Saudi-Iran Rapprochement & Its Implications

Saadain Gardezi

The recent rapprochement between regional rivals Saudi Arabia and Iran facilitated by China marks a black swan event that has the potential to transform the Middle East region through the resolution of outstanding disputes, increased multilateralism, and concentrated efforts for economic diversification.

The rivalry was primarily developed in the aftermath of the Iranian revolution in 1979, which resulted in the development of a binary in the region where Saudi Arabia and Iran engaged in a power struggle as two regional powers to exert their influence across the region, which was often perceived to be mutually exclusive by them. Their support for leaders and non-state actors across the region was premised upon a combination of ideology and geopolitics.

The rapprochement indicates a shift from the binary towards a more stable region having the potential to emerge as an important bloc in the current world order while allowing key states to direct their energies in pursuing their internal reforms. It is, however, pertinent to examine the factors that led to this development and its potential impacts.

Both Saudi Arabia and Iran appear to be the main benefactors of the normalization. For Saudi Arabia, the ceasing of hostilities with

Iran would provide it the space to advance its economic diversification agenda, as enshrined in the Kingdom's Vision 2030. For Iran, it is a diplomatic breakthrough amid crippling sanctions and the strengthening of its ties with China. The decision has also been welcomed at the Arab League's 32nd Arab League summit held around mid-May.

However, not everybody in the region and beyond seemed happy with the development. Israel's opposition leader Yair Lapid termed the development as "a total and dangerous foreign policy failure of the Israeli government," while former prime minister Naftali Bennett called it "a serious and dangerous development for Israel, a political victory for Iran and a fatal blow to the effort to build a regional coalition against Iran." The United States also expressed what has been termed as cautious optimism, with officials terming it a positive development while also indicating skepticism of Iran holding up its end of the deal.

From the part of Saudi Arabia, the shift indicates a wider recalibration of the Kingdom's domestic and global agenda. Historically characterized by a conservative mindset based on the strict Wahhabi interpretation of Islam, the Kingdom has gradually taken numerous steps to reform and rebrand itself under the leadership of the Saudi crown prince and prime minister Mohammed Bin Salman (MBS). The Vision 2030 Strategy in this regard was unveiled by MBS in 2016, through which the Kingdom

seeks to diversify its economy, reduce its dependence on oil, and develop public service sectors focusing on tourism, infrastructure, health, and education.

Moreover, a major shift can clearly be seen in the context of Saudi' thinking and conduct of international relations in recent times. The America First policy pursued by Donald Trump caused great distress among US allies as he continuously complained that the countries hosting US troops are not paying enough. He went on to say in 2018 that the Saudi King wouldn't last 'two weeks' without US support and that it should pay more for its defense.

A subsequent attack on Aramco's oil facilities in 2019 knocked out around half of the Kingdom's oil output, further aggravating the Kingdom's anxieties with regard to its security. It is believed that these two factors combined led Saudi Arabia to rethink its complete dependence on the US for security needs in a region where instability is primarily caused by its competition for influence with Iran. Biden's election campaign statements in which he promised to make Saudis "pay the price, and make them, in fact, the pariah that they are" further added fuel to the fire.

Biden eventually had to travel to the Kingdom in 2022 to ask the Kingdom to increase oil supplies amid a global energy crisis triggered by the Ukraine conflict, but the effects of these developments could be seen in the form of a cold Saudi reception,

perfectly depicted in the first bump between both leaders. The Kingdom is also set to join the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) joining Iran from the region and expressed its willingness to join China-led BRICS alongside Iran, which depicts that the Kingdom has swayed from its predominantly US-centric foreign policy and fostering wider ties with its largest trading partner China. China, which also recently signed a \$400 billion strategic partnership with Iran spanning 25 years, already enjoys long-lasting relations with Iran.

The results of the rapprochement are already visible. Efforts to end the Yemen war have already been initiated by Saudi Arabia, Syria has been re-admitted to the Arab League after a hiatus of more than a decade, and efforts for improvement of relations between Iran and Egypt are underway, and it's just the beginning. Given the emphasis on each other's sovereignty in the China-brokered rapprochement, it has the potential to stabilize the region if both sides adhere to the deal by halting their support for their alleged proxies across the region, which would address each other's primary security concerns. It can also be said that a peaceful Middle East in the absence of regional power competition has the potential to emerge as an essential region in the evolving multipolar world order, and the ceasing of an inter-region power struggle with an end to the binary divide can uplift the region as an important stakeholder of the likes of EU and ASEAN in the arena of global politics.

Therefore, it can be argued that the Saudi-Iran rapprochement has the potential to transform the Middle East region at the state, regional, and international levels. Keeping its already-evident implications in mind, it has the potential to resolve outstanding conflicts in the region, enabling states to direct their energies on their economies, with an increased focus on geo-economics. The region needs to capitalize upon this momentum to build a regionally-integrated

and internationally-united region having political leverage in the international system as it seeks to stay relevant in a post-oil world.

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Will India act against China on behalf of US?

Muhammad Abubaker

An Indian analyst “Ashley J. Tellis” challenged the widely held belief that India would support the US in a potential conflict with China. He provided compelling evidence to debunk this notion in a recent article “America’s Bad Bet on India”. All successive US presidents have fostered ties with India with the aim to use India as a counterweight to China’s growing military and economic might.

The strategic bonhomie is evident from defense cooperation, increasing trade ties, and US recognition of India as a ‘Major Defense Partner’. Moreover, India’s access to and procurement of cutting-edge technology, maritime surveillance against China’s naval activity, and joint exercises like Malabar and Cope India demonstrate the close cooperation between the two nations.

India and China the two Asian powers locked horns at Ladakh in May 2020. A clash at Galwan Valley resulted in the death of 20 Indian and 4 Chinese Soldiers. It seriously damaged their bilateral relations. Resultantly, both sides reinforced their positions with tens of thousands of troops and equipment, and by building the necessary infrastructure to cope with emerging threats at LAC. This conflict eroded ties and heightened political hostility between the two Asian neighbors.

As a result, India used China’s threat as an excuse to avail the US support to fill technological gaps, deepen defense cooperation, and modernize its military & critical infrastructure. The perceived threat posed by China has fostered a sense of unity between the US and India. However, it is important to note that India’s strategic autonomy approach means that it is unlikely to take direct actions against China despite the appearance of alignment with the US. The gist of the above discussion is that India won’t fight on behalf of the US and will shy away from providing material support to the US.

Changing Strategies

India under Modi no longer seeks to align itself with any specific bloc to reap maximum benefits. It is visible from its engagement in multilateral institutions like G-20, BRICS, and SCO. Its active participation in China and Russian-dominated forums like SCO with an anti-West character despite having strong ties with the West demonstrated India’s concept of strategic autonomy. Apart from that, it routinely participates in trilateral meetings with both Russia and China and despite flare-ups at LAC kept communication channels open with China.

It was evident from the recently held talks between Indian Defense Minister Rajnath Singh and his Chinese counterpart General Li Shangfu on the sidelines of the SCO. Both sides held their respective positions and the divergence between India

and China on border issues was on full display. They did not exchange a handshake ahead of the meeting and after the meeting, both sides issued divergent statements. India's defense ministry in a statement said that violation of existing agreements has eroded the entire basis of bilateral relations and China's defense minister emphasized the need to place the border issue in an appropriate position within bilateral relations. In addition to that, he reiterated that the situation on the China-India border is generally stable. The divergence in their statements shows that a clear resolution is currently elusive.

Additionally, there is another dimension to look at India's reluctance to align with the US is its concerns about the Russia-China close partnership. India is wary of the growing partnership between the two powers and does not want to see Russia as a Chinese client state. It fears that such a situation will erode its capacity to defend its self both diplomatically and militarily. Historically, India has been a significant buyer of Russian technology & military equipment.

Foreign Policy Choices and Strategic Autonomy

Chinese and Russian close cooperation will erode India's efforts to diversify foreign sources of military technologies and multilateral cooperation. That is why India is hesitant to sever ties with Russia. The ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine revealed this approach that India won't

compromise on its ties with Russia. Despite immense pressure from the US and European countries India refrained from condemning Russia. Moreover, India's reluctance to fully align with the US stems from the concern that such a move could strengthen cooperation between Russia, China, and Pakistan. Which India fears and seeks to prevent. This apprehension hinders New Delhi to completely embrace alignment with the US.

The purpose of Ashley Tellis piece is to convey a message that India is focused on building its military capabilities independently and aims to be able to unilaterally address any potential conflict with China when the time is right. India seeks the US side's support to bridge the technological gaps that can assist India in this pursuit. Additionally, any visible alignment between the US and India should be viewed as an issue-based alignment rather than a comprehensive alignment.

Apart from that, India has specific concerns that a strong partnership between China & Russia may limit Moscow's ability to exert pressure on China to ease its pressure on India at LAC. Second, India relies on the Russian side for defense equipment, if the China-Russia partnership deepens, Russia might opt to delay the supply of advanced weaponry. Lastly, as the US becomes increasingly impatient with Russia's actions against Ukraine, there could be mounting pressure on India as a fellow democracy to take a more decisive stance. It may act as a

blow to India's foreign policy choices and strategic autonomy.

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Kremlin Drone Attack: Conflicting Narratives and Relevance for South Asia

Shayan Hassan Jamy

On May 3rd, 2023, two consecutive drone strikes targeted the Kremlin, the official residence of the Russian President Vladimir Putin. Russia claimed the attack was an assassination attempt on President Putin by Ukraine. Video footage of the incident appeared to show two drones reaching the top of the Kremlin building and causing small explosions within a span of about 15 minutes of each other. Ukraine denied any involvement, claiming instead that Russia had launched a false flag operation in order to justify a large-scale attack. Whatever the case may be, this incident marked a new chapter in the Russia-Ukraine war, a conflict that shows no signs of ending even after 14 months.

Conflicting Narratives

From the Russian perspective, this attack was a Ukrainian assassination attempt on President Putin and a major escalation of the war. This was evident from statements made by the Russian leadership following the incident. Former Russian President and current Deputy Secretary of Putin's Security Council Dmitri Medvedev stated that, "there are no options left other than the physical elimination of Zelensky and his clique". Similarly, Speaker of the Russian parliament Vyacheslav Volodin demanded the use of

"weapons capable of stopping and destroying the Kyiv terrorist regime". Clearly, the Russian leadership saw this attack as providing them with enough justification to escalate the war. Russia also accused the US of being behind the attack, stating that "the US was selecting targets and that Ukraine was merely implementing American plans".

Ukraine denied any involvement in the incident. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy stated that, "we don't attack Putin, or Moscow, we fight on our territory". From the Ukrainian perspective, the Kremlin drone attack was false flag operation initiated by Russia itself. Senior Ukrainian presidential official Mykhailo Podolyak stated that Russia was "clearly preparing a large-scale terrorist attack".

Given the conflicting narratives presented by both states regarding this incident, it is important to analyse the available information and attempt to separate the fact from fiction.

Analysis: Fact vs. Fiction

Firstly, the Russian claims of the drone strikes being an assassination attempt on President Putin are hard to believe. Even if the attack was launched by Ukraine, the drone strikes clearly targeted the roof of the Kremlin and only resulted in small explosions. It was also later confirmed that President Putin was not present in the Kremlin building at the time of the attack. A

more likely scenario is that this could have been a message of intent from Ukraine, showing Russia that they were able to target the heart of Moscow without being stopped. The attack came about a week before the May 9th Victory Day parade celebrations across Russia, and caused them to dial down their initial plans.

Russia also claimed to have stopped the drones before they could cause any damage. A presidential press release stated that “timely action by the military and special services involving radar systems enabled them to disable the devices (drones)”. It is difficult to confirm this claim based on the video footage released. The drones appeared to explode just before impact with the Kremlin building, indicating either that the Russians were able to disrupt them, or that this was a controlled explosion that had successfully reached its target.

Secondly, Ukraine’s claim of the attack being a false-flag operation by Russia is certainly possible. Russia has already used this incident to justify a major escalatory response, by regularly launching a barrage of drones and missiles towards Ukrainian cities. Given the statements from the Russian leadership, it can be expected that this trend of drone warfare will only increase in the coming days, and that Russia will use this incident to justify further military actions against Ukraine.

However, the question arises as to why exactly Russia would need to stage a drone

strike on the Kremlin to justify an escalation of the war? Within the past few weeks alone, Ukraine had reportedly launched several other drone strikes targeting Russian cities and infrastructure, and even caused a major fire at one of its oil refineries in Crimea. If Russia simply wanted an incident to justify their escalatory response, that could have been enough.

Thirdly, the video footage also raises certain questions. Following the attack, multiple videos were released which covered the attack from various angles. Most of the videos were in good quality, and were able to capture the flight trajectory of the drones, as well as the moment they exploded above the Kremlin. This does lend weight to Ukraine’s claim of Russia staging a false-flag operation. However, it seems rather puzzling as to why Russia would publicise evidence of a Ukrainian strike on the Kremlin. The Kremlin is in the heart of Moscow, and is a building of symbolic and historic significance for Russia. The fact that the drones were able to reach the Kremlin building is worrying, and a rather embarrassing incident for Russia to openly admit to.

Fourthly, even if Ukraine was behind the drone strikes, the possibility of the drones being launched from within Ukraine, bypassing Russia’s extensive air defence systems, and reaching the Kremlin seems unlikely. Moscow is some 450 km from the Ukrainian border, and the Kremlin building

is supposedly under heavy guard. A more likely possibility is that Ukrainian operatives within Russia launched the attack. This would explain how the drones were able to reach the Kremlin building without being detected.

If this was a Ukrainian attack, it was certainly a major escalation of the war. Although Ukraine had likely conducted drone strikes within Russia before, none had targeted Moscow. Most of the previous drone strikes had targeted Crimea, or occurred closer to the Russian border. Given the significance of the Kremlin building to Russia, Ukraine has sent quite a strong message of intent, if it indeed was behind the attack.

Both the Russian and Ukrainian narratives surrounding the drone attacks seem possible. Such is the reality of modern times; we are now living in a post-truth world, and it has become extremely difficult to differentiate fact from fiction. The truth of who launched the attack might never be revealed; it also might not matter. Russia has already used the incident to justify a strong response, and Ukraine has launched its counter-offensive. Ultimately, history is written by the victors.

Relevance for South Asia

The Kremlin drone attack also has great relevance for South Asia. Firstly, it points to the increasing trend of drone warfare, which has been displayed in recent years by states such as the US, Israel, Azerbaijan and others. India is also investing heavily in drones and

Artificial Intelligence (AI), and has already reportedly deployed intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) drones on its Western border with Pakistan. Pakistan will have to face the threat of drone warfare from India, and should invest in counter-technologies and tactics.

Secondly, the response of both Russia and Ukraine following the Kremlin incident once again proved that geopolitical truth is subjective, as both states were able to mould the attack to suit their own narratives. Likewise, after the 2019 Balakot crisis, both India and Pakistan claimed victory, although several of India's claims were later debunked. In the midst of a conflict, however, both misinformation and disinformation become common. Pakistan, then, must also prepare itself to deal with Indian and Western propaganda in any potential future crisis with India. Lastly, it is likely that India will be encouraged to embark on such an adventure. The US supported Ukraine's narrative during the Kremlin incident, and India knows that they would have full American support if they chose to target Pakistan. Given the increasing use of emerging technologies in warfare, blurring lines of the media landscape, and likelihood of Indian military aggression towards Pakistan, Pakistan must be proactive and prepare for the complexity of future warfare.

<https://strafasia.com/kremlin-drone-attack-conflicting-narratives-and-relevance-for-south-asia/amp/>

Deciphering the Arrest of Indian Naval Officers in Qatar

Ahmad Ali

The arrest of eight former Indian naval officers in Qatar came to light when the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) of India termed it a “high priority” issue. In August 2022, Qatari authorities took the former naval officers into custody on unspecified charges. After months of detention, the Qatari authorities revealed that these former naval officers were spying on Qatar’s secret submarine program for Israel. However, keeping in view the India-Israel relationship, similar past incidents and the government’s proactive pursuit, it is likely that these officers were working at the behest of the Indian government. It is also significant to explore how the whole incident affects the relationship between Qatar and India.

It is important to note that these Indian nationals worked at Qatar’s Dahra Global Technologies and Consulting Services. It is a private company that offers training and various other services to the defence and security agencies of Qatar. Moreover, Dahra Technologies is a local partner in Qatar’s secret project to obtain Italian submarines, and reportedly Qatar is in the process of acquiring the submarines. Following the

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incident, Dahra Global is being shut down, and all the Indian employees have been asked to resign. The majority of these individuals, over seventy-five in number, consist of former Indian Navy personnel. They have been notified that their employment with Dahra will terminate on May 31, 2023.

In this context, Qatar will likely procure U212 advanced submarines capable of avoiding radar detection. It is worth noting that after procuring the submarines, Qatar will become the second country after Iran to operate submarines in the Persian Gulf. This submarine project is part of an agreement between Qatar and Italian shipbuilding company Fincantieri that also includes naval base construction and supply of naval vessels. It is essential to highlight that Qatar and Italy signed a five-billion-euro defence deal in 2017. Later in 2020, Qatar and an Italian defence company signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) to supply defence equipment to Qatar. It is currently unclear which agreement the submarine deal was actually part of. However, it is most likely that this project is part of the 2017 defence deal, as reports suggest that MoU signed in 2020 is yet to be implemented.

After months of detention, the Qatari authorities revealed that these former

naval officers were spying on Qatar's secret submarine program for Israel.

At the time of arrest, Qatari authorities did not disclose the charges. However, later, the spying charges were revealed, which took the region as well as India by surprise. Moreover, Qatar told the Indian authorities about the digital evidence of espionage for Israel. It is pertinent to note that Indian authorities are making extensive efforts to secure the release of these eight officers despite Qatar's emphasis on trial. Following the arrest, a high-ranking Indian official visited Qatar to secure the release of the officers. Additionally, the Indian MEA acknowledged that India is making efforts for the early release of the former naval officers. Apart from this, India and Israel have a long-standing relationship, and both countries have proven intelligence cooperation. In this context, Qatar's procurement of advanced submarines is likely to be a game-changer in the region. Israel has concerns over the submarine deal because it could potentially erode Tel Aviv's military superiority over its Arab rivals. Thus, it can be argued that the Indian officers spied on Qatar's submarine project at the behest of the Indian intelligence agency, while Israel was the ultimate beneficiary. These instances suggest that these spies worked for the Indian intelligence agency, Research and Analysis Wing (RAW).

Moreover, this was not the only incident where Indian spies were apprehended on

foreign land; there have been incidents in the past where Indian nationals, including military personnel, were arrested on espionage charges. One such incident occurred in 2014 when the United Arab Emirates (UAE) arrested and later convicted two Indians for providing sensitive information about the UAE to Indian intelligence. It was proved that convicted spies were in contact with officers from the Indian embassy in UAE. Similarly, in 2019, a German court convicted an Indian couple living in Germany of spying. The couple confessed their affiliation with Indian RAW and acknowledged gathering and supplying information about Kashmiri and Sikh individuals residing in Germany to the Indian intelligence agency. Additionally, in March 2016, Pakistani authorities arrested a serving Indian Naval officer, Kulbhushan Jadhav, from the Pakistani province of Balochistan, on charges of facilitating terrorist activities and spying for the Indian intelligence agency, RAW. Also, Mr Jadhav confessed to his crimes after the arrest. Apart from this, there have been a number of cases where Pakistan arrested Indian spies involved in malicious activities inside Pakistan. Keeping in view the history of such incidents, it is most likely that the arrested naval officers in Qatar were working for Indian intelligence, and the Indian government had a role in this espionage attempt.

It is pertinent to note that presently India and Qatar have good relations, and there has been cooperation between both countries in

various domains, including defence and economy. However, this incident might have repercussions for bilateral ties between both countries. In case the involvement of the Indian government proves, which is most likely to happen, Qatar might choose to reassess the nature of its relationship with India. This could potentially lead to a diplomatic strain and might lead to stricter scrutiny of Indian activities within Qatar.

<https://cscr.pk/explore/themes/defense-security/deciphering-the-arrest-of-indian-naval-officers-in-qatar/>

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