

# **Strategic Stability Challenges in South Asia**

Syed Rifaat Hussain\*

*\* Syed Rifaat Hussain is Head of the Department of Government & Public Policy, School of Social Sciences and Humanities, National University of Sciences and Technology, Sector H-12, Islamabad, Pakistan. Email: [dr.rifaat@s3h.nust.edu.pk](mailto:dr.rifaat@s3h.nust.edu.pk)*



## **Abstract**

The dominant framework for analyzing strategic stability question in South Asia has been the stability/instability paradox. Advocates of stability aspect have presented nuclear peace thesis, which argues that because of their mammoth destructive potential nuclear weapons deter aggression and strengthen peace between nuclear rivals. Advocates of the instability aspect, on the other hand, have drawn attention to the use of space for limited war under the nuclear overhang. This monograph takes a more dynamic view of strategic stability in which domestic, regional and global factors have contributed to make practice of nuclear deterrence between India and Pakistan more complex and inherently unstable. Conflict resolution centered around the core question of Kashmir remains the key to durable peace in South Asia.



The discussion in this monograph is divided into two broad sections. The first section begins by noting the significance of the concept of stability and then delineates the meaning of strategic stability as a cold war construct and its evolution. The second section applies this notion to regional context of nuclear South Asia and identifies key challenges posed by it.

Stability is a contested intellectual construct with no consensus on its precise meaning. As noted by Patrick A. McCarthy, “it is overly simplistic and, more than not, inaccurate to label a changing system unstable or to label an unchanging system stable.”<sup>1</sup>

What is stability in the nuclear context? In broad terms nuclear stability refers to all those factors or conditions that work to ensure against the breakdown of nuclear deterrence. Henry A. Kissinger has defined strategic stability as a condition “that requires maintaining strategic forces of sufficient size and composition that a first strike cannot reduce retaliation to a level acceptable to the aggressor... We need a sufficient number of weapons to pose a threat to what potential aggressors value under every conceivable circumstance. We should avoid strategic analysis by mirror-imaging”.<sup>2</sup>

Deterrence stability is crucial to war prevention between nuclear adversaries. As pointed out by Thomas Schelling and

---

<sup>1</sup> P. A. McCarthy, *Hierarchy and Flexibility in World Politics: Adapting to Shifting Power Distribution in the United Nations Security Council and the International Monetary Fund* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1996), p. 11.

<sup>2</sup> Henry A Kissinger Brent Scowcroft, “Strategic Stability in Today’s Nuclear World,” *The Washington Post*, April 23, 2012.

Morton Halperin, “A balance of deterrence - a situation in which the incentives on both sides to initiate war are outweighed by the disincentives - is stable when it is reasonably secure against shocks, alarms and perturbations. That is, it is stable when political events, internal or external to the countries involved, technological change, accidents, false alarms, misunderstandings, crises, limited wars, or changes in the intelligence available to both sides, are unlikely to disturb the incentives sufficiently to make deterrence fail.”<sup>3</sup>

South Asia’s passage to overt nuclearization in 1998 has led to the formation of “two camps of deterrence theorists...over whether a nuclearized subcontinent will prevent a major conflict and foster escalation.” These two camps might be called deterrence optimists and deterrence pessimists. Deterrence optimists maintain that nuclear weapons by making war catastrophically costly generate incentives for war avoidance between nuclear rivals and therefore create stability between them. Deterrence optimists have put forth the nuclear peace thesis which states that wars between nuclear-armed nation-states will be unlikely to start, and, if they do, the conflicts are likely to be limited because the belligerents will stop fighting short of the intensity needed to bring about the resort to nuclear weapons.

Deterrence pessimists, on the other hand, argue that notwithstanding their enormous destructive potential, nuclear

---

<sup>3</sup> T. Schelling and M. Halperin, *Strategy and Arms Control* (New York: Twentieth Century Fund, 1962), p. 50

weapons fail to produce stability because of a range of political, technical and organizational factors. Some of the specific problems that trump stability between nuclear states include risk acceptant or irrational leaders, command-and-control difficulties, and preemption incentives for small arsenals.

Scott Sagan has argued that “India and Pakistan face a dangerous nuclear future...imperfect human inside imperfect organizations...will someday fail to produce secure nuclear deterrence.” Concurring with Sagan, P.R. Chari states that South Asian proliferation undermines a “widely held, a priori belief...that nuclear weapons states do not go to war against each other.”<sup>4</sup> In the same vein, Michael Krepon, a self-proclaimed deterrence pessimist, has identified a number of “conditions” that tend to undermine processes of escalation control and stability of nuclear deterrence between India and Pakistan. These destabilizing factors include: “uncertainties associated with the nuclear equation” between India and Pakistan, “India’s vulnerability associated with command and control”, Pakistan’s “nightmare scenario of preemption” due to India’s “move toward a ready arsenal”, the shifting of the “conventional military balance in India’s favor,” “the absence of nuclear risk reduction measures on the subcontinent”, the tendency by both governments to “resort to brinkmanship over Kashmir,” “the juxtaposition of India’s nuclear doctrine of massive retaliation with

---

<sup>4</sup> S. D. Sagan, “For the Worse: till death do us part,” in S. D. Sagan K Waltz, (eds), *The Spread of Nuclear weapons: A Debate Renewed* (New York: Norton, 2003), pp. 106-107.

a conventional war-fighting doctrine focusing on limited war”.<sup>5</sup>

Michael Ryan Kraig has highlighted the following drivers of nuclear instability between India and Pakistan:

- The dangers created by geographical proximity between India and Pakistan and India, in contrast to the Cold War, in which the US and Soviets had political-strategic but not territorial proximity to each other;
- The lack of stable boundaries, or at least of stable, tacit agreements on defacto boundaries where disputes about territory still exist;
- The presence of ethno-religious cleavages which are integral to the two state’s founding national identities, in contrast to the more abstract Cold War divisions that were based upon broad political-economic philosophies;
- The existence of violent internal exigencies, which are connected to the above three situational factors and which are also persistently linked to the overarching state-level strategic threats between the two countries;
- The persistent lack of feasible and reliable early warning sensors (due in part to technological barriers and in part to geographic proximity);
- The lack of reliable nuclear safety and warhead access

---

<sup>5</sup> Michael Krepon, “The stability-instability paradox, misperceptions and escalation control in South Asia”, in M. Krepon and C. Gagne, (eds). *The Stability-Instability Paradox: Nuclear Weapons and Brinkmanship in South Asia* (Washington, D.C: Stimson Center, 2001), p. 16

devices (such as Permissive Action Links that ensure only authorized personnel can arm or launch weapons and environmental sensors that will allow detonation only when the warhead is actually at its target); and

- The relative absence of dedicated command and control architectures that allow reliable civilian control during heightened tensions (an absence that is connected to the above factors of nuclear access devices and early warning systems).”<sup>6</sup>

After comparing the East-West Cold War model of deterrence stability with India-Pakistan deterrent relationship, Michael Quinlin concludes that “Overall, the underpinnings of war-preventing stability seems less solid than they had become in at least the later years of East-West confrontation...the “risks look higher than in the East-West confrontation, both in the political dimension (above all because of Kashmir) in the military one, because of close proximity and the long-time scale and heavy costs, if operational deployment does go ahead, of reaching the standards of control, invulnerability and safety eventually reached – after much learning and expense – during the Cold War.” He goes on to observe that “unless one side or other grossly neglects prudent defensive dispositions, neither temptations nor ‘use-or-lose’ fears need be plausible.” To ensure crisis-stability, Michael Quinlin, recommends

---

<sup>6</sup> M.R. Kraig, “The political and strategic Imperatives of nuclear deterrence in South Asia,” *India Review*, Vol. 2 No. 1 (January 2003), p. 3

“if deployment is to proceed at all, neither country should stop at a very low level (for example in single figures) because of risks to crisis stability and confidence if there are perceptions of severe vulnerability and so of pre-emptive danger or opportunity. In addition, an armoury so small as plainly to offer only a single strike option may be bad both for credibility and for proper focus upon war termination, if grave conflict does break out.”<sup>7</sup>

As the foregoing discussion of different views of scholarly opinion on the question of strategic stability, suggests that India-Pakistan nuclear deterrence equation, while seemingly stable, is liable to experience severe jolts on account of their enduring rivalry, changing patterns of regional alignments and changing interests of extra-regional powers. A mix of global, regional and domestic trends in domestic politics of each of the two nuclear armed states that would negatively impact on South Asian strategic stability is presented in the following table.

A cursory glance at the table would reveal that South Asia is undergoing a remarkable structural change that would ultimately lead to a power shift in favor of India as a dominant power.

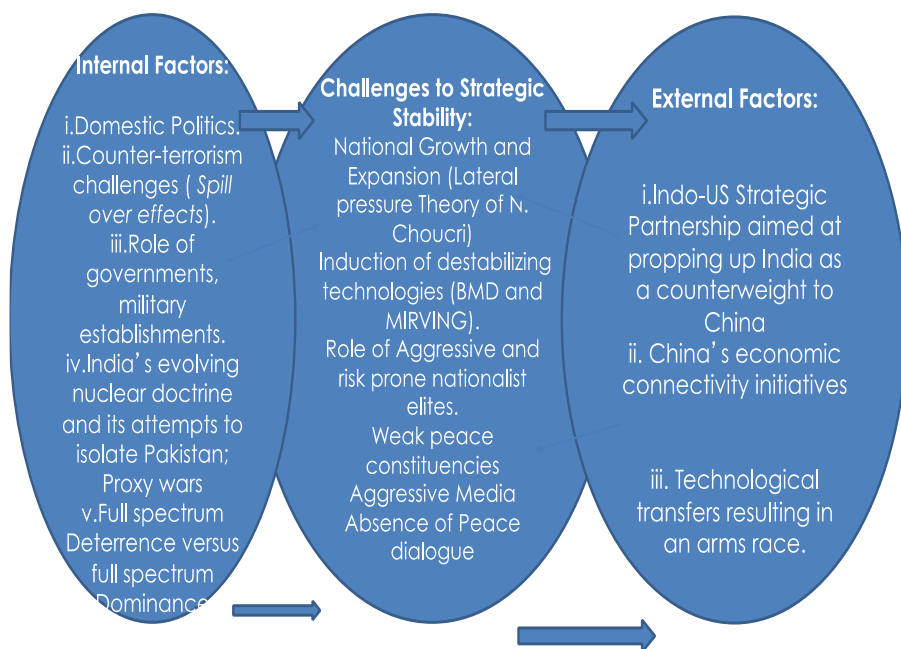
Ever since the advent to power of the Modi government in India in 2014, India’s domestic environment has undergone a radical rightward shift. As part of its aggressive pursuit of Hindutva, Modi government has consciously cultivated forces of Hindu extremism

---

<sup>7</sup>Ibid.

and has provided them the space to carry out their violent campaigns against minorities including Muslims, Christians and others.

## Risks to strategic stability in South Asia- Leading Causes



As a consequence, civic space has drastically shrunk and India today has become the most intolerant society. The 2017 World Press Freedom Index of Reporters without Borders (RSF), “ranked India 136<sup>th</sup> out of 180 countries, and it “placed below Afghanistan, Palestine, and Myanmar”.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup>Cited in Asian Democracy Research Network, “*Civic Space in Asia: Emerging Issues and Policy Lessons from Six Asian Countries*, (March 2018), 27.

The ADRN in its March 2018 on *Civic Space in Asia* concluded:

“In recent years...there has been pushback against the progress made in terms civic engagement...the authorities have used repressive laws to curb freedom of expression and silence critics. Human right defenders and organizations continue to face harassment and intimidation, and vigilante cow protection groups have carried out several attacks. Thousands have protested again discrimination and violence faced by minorities. Millions of people have opposed changes to labor laws. Jammu and Kashmir witnessed months of curfew and a range of human rights violations by authorities. Such events reflect India’s trend away from constitutional democracy toward a populist democracy, where majoritarian views are upheld.”<sup>9</sup>

This domestic trend toward violent extremism has been accompanied by state-sanctioned “hate” campaigns against Pakistan in which Islamabad has been painted as the “poster child” of “Jihadi terrorist” violence in India.

To punish Pakistan India claimed in 2016 that it had successfully waged “surgical strikes” a long Line of Control in the disputed territory of Kashmir. These outlandish Indian claims have been met with disbelief by rational circles in India and have been vehemently denied by Pakistan.

---

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 34.

Simultaneously, India has been working on the theory of full-spectrum dominance. India is now developing conventional war-fighting options to dominate all rungs of the escalation ladder including limited nuclear use options. This evolving Indian strategy is fraught with dangerous consequences. As recently noted by Montgomery and Edelman:

“...a competition for escalation dominance is now taking place in South Asia. This has at least two worrisome implications. First, the likelihood of a regional nuclear conflict could increase sharply. India, for example, might conclude that it can invade Pakistan without inciting nuclear retaliation, while Pakistan might believe that it can use nuclear weapons without triggering a nuclear exchange...Second, this competition could be the catalyst for a major expansion of India’s nuclear weapon program, including the development of its own limited nuclear use options.”<sup>10</sup>

In this attempt for escalation dominance vis-à-vis Pakistan, India is relying on its strategic partnership with Washington, which is worried about the rise of China. In a throwback to the Brzezinski-Carter notion of “regional influentials”, successive US administrations since the March 2000 Clinton visit to India, have described India as a ‘net provider of security’ in the Asia-Pacific region.<sup>11</sup> The most significant aspect of this emerging Indo-US axis

---

<sup>10</sup> Evan Braden Montgomery and Eric Edelman, “Rethinking Stability in South Asia: India, Pakistan and the competition for Escalation Dominance,” *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol 38 Nos. 1-2 (2015), p. 160.

<sup>11</sup>See several statements by former US Secretary of Defense Robert Gates at The

is the India-US civilian nuclear deal. Through this deal, India stands to gain access to US civilian nuclear technology in return for laying out 65 per cent of its nuclear power production under international supervision and separating its nuclear facilities into civilian and military. While energy experts in India say that the deal would result in satisfying only 7 per cent of the country's energy requirements when operational, its symbolism in the geopolitical arena was unrivalled.<sup>12</sup> To contain China, the US is trying to build India up as its regional ally. It is not a coincidence that India and the US are the only two countries that have publicly opposed the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).

China presents India with a twofold problem: material and ideational. With a GDP of approximately 11 trillion dollars, which is growing at about 8 percent per year, the Chinese economy is bigger and expanding more rapidly than India's 3 trillion dollar economy. The Indians fear that as a result of its superior and sustained economic growth China 'would amass an overwhelming preponderance of power' that would frustrate India's long-standing desire to play the role of a regional hegemon in South Asia. At the ideational level, China's stupendous economic growth as a result of which over '600 million Chinese people have been lifted out of poverty,' presents a challenge to India where 56 per cent of its

---

Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore.

<sup>12</sup> Hogg C.L. *India and its Neighbors: Do Economic Interests have the Potential to Build Peace* (London: Chatham House, 2007), p. 5.

population remains mired in abject poverty. The biggest challenge to India's economic growth and dominance remains the reality of the 'other' India: according to the World Bank data, over 300 million Indians still live in abject poverty, and another 300 million hover precariously above the poverty line.

To promote their overlapping interests in containing China, India and the US have joined hands in the form of Indo-US axis. The military dimension of the relationship, reflected in a far-reaching agreement called the "New Framework for the U.S.–India Defense Relationship" signed by the defence ministers of both countries on 28 June 2005, commits both countries to collaborative 'multinational operations' and to strengthening their military capabilities 'to promote security' and 'combat proliferation' of weapons of mass destruction (WMDs). The two countries have also committed to a 'defence strategy' dialogue and intelligence exchanges, pledging to 'assist in building worldwide capacity to conduct successful peacekeeping operations, with a focus on enabling other countries to field trained/capable forces for these. The Indo-US nuclear agreement recognized New Delhi as a "legitimate nuclear power", according to Ashton Carter.<sup>13</sup>

In the post-September 11 world, drastic modifications were made in the framework of Indo-US engagement: "a number of sanctions imposed earlier were removed; the door for high-tech

---

<sup>13</sup> Swapna Banerjee, "Post-September 11 Indo-US strategic ties: Locating power and hegemony," *The Geographical Journal*, Vol. 177, No. 3 (September 2011), pp. 227.

cooperation was opened; political support was granted to India's own war on terrorism; the Kashmir issue was reconsidered with a positive tilt towards India."<sup>14</sup>

Since then India and US have broadened and deepened the scope of their defence cooperation.<sup>15</sup> At present, India is among the top-10 military spending countries in the world. During 2006-2010, it accounted for 9 per cent of all global arms imports, making it the world's largest weapon importer.<sup>16</sup> In April 2018, Washington as part of its "Buy American" push announced a new policy intended to loosen export restrictions on armed drones. In announcing the changes, Peter Navarro, President Donald Trump's trade advisor, argued that American restrictive policies had put the United States in danger of losing out on an estimated \$50 billion international market for drones. According to Navarro. "The administration's [unmanned aerial systems] export policy will level the playing field by enabling U.S. firms to increase direct sales to authorized allies and partners."<sup>17</sup> Washington's new policy on the export of American-manufactured aerial system (UAS) will allow New Delhi to purchase large number of armed and surveillance drones from the U.S.

---

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. p. 223-27.

<sup>15</sup> See "Trump reduces hurdles for sale of drone to allies," *TNN and Agencies*, April 20, 2018

<sup>16</sup> *SIPRI Year Book* 2013.

<sup>17</sup> Sharon Weinberger, "China has already won the Drone War," *Foreign Policy*, May 10, 2018.

New Delhi's strategic modernization drive and its huge arms-build up is widening the gap in conventional military capabilities between India and Pakistan and forcing Islamabad to rely more and more on its nuclear option to offset India's conventional force advantage.

The current high economic growth of 7% or more displayed by India should be a source of concern to its entire neighborhood because a significant portion of new Indian wealth is being spent on Indian defense and not on social needs of the people. As suggested by Nazli Choucri and Robert C. North in their seminal study, *Nations in Conflict: National Growth And International Violence* (1975), "Growth can be a lethal process...a growing state tends to expand its activities and interests outward – colliding with the sphere of interest with other states – and find itself embroiled in international conflict, crises, and wars that, at least initially, may not have been sought or even contemplated. The more a state grows, and thus the greater its capabilities, the more likely it is to follow such a tendency." They posit that economic growth and expansion lead to conflict of interest which lead to higher demand for military capabilities and alliances as a means to augment a nation's military capabilities which ultimately results in "violent action directed toward all other nations."<sup>18</sup>

---

<sup>18</sup> Nazli Choucri and Robert C. North, *Nations in Conflict: National Growth And International Violence* (San Francisco: W. H. Freeman and Company, 1975), pp: 1-11.

Washington under Trump has enthusiastically accepted India as its strategic partner and both are working closely to contain China. Both Washington and New Delhi are opposed to China's advocacy of its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) that they see as offering Beijing a historic opportunity to win "hundred years marathon race" against them. As a declining hegemonic power, USA is desperately searching for regional allies to shore up its crumbling empire.

New Delhi is playing a smart game of maintaining economic and trade links with Beijing while tapping into technological resources of the U.S through its strategic partnership with Washington.

Because of its strategic geography, its important demography and its strategic alliance with China, Islamabad cannot easily be outsmarted by India, however. So ultimately India and Pakistan, as nuclear-armed neighbors, would have to revert to a process of dialogue between them to sort out their difficulties. This is necessary to not let the violent non-state actors hold the reconciliation process hostage to the pursuit of their private agendas. A good starting point would be the revival of the stalled India-Pakistan peace dialogue with a focus on resolving the core Kashmir dispute.