

Strategic Stability in South Asia

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Introduction

The security landscape in South Asia is exceptionally intricate, characterized by volatile relationships involving three nuclear-armed states: China, India, and Pakistan. India and Pakistan, in particular, have maintained confrontational postures since their respective declarations of independence from British colonial rule. The root causes of this enduring hostility include disputes over territorial boundaries stemming from the tumultuous partition of the two nations, competition for limited resources, and a history marked by mutual mistrust and conflict.

Background

Strategic stability, as a conceptual framework, emerged in the wake of nuclear weapon development and has continued to evolve since the Cold War era. India and Pakistan have adopted much of the Cold War nuclear terminology for their analytical purposes, drawing substantial influence from historical examples like the U.S.-USSR rivalry. Thus, the theoretical understanding of strategic stability in South Asia is significantly shaped by Western scholars and academic literature.

Thomas Schelling's perspective on strategic stability emphasizes the importance of mutual vulnerability, making it less likely for either side to initiate conflict when both possess weapons that don't require a first strike to avoid destruction.

Strategic Stability and Nuclear Posture

Strategic stability, at its core, concerns a nation's ability to retaliate effectively after absorbing an initial nuclear attack from an adversary. This concept hinges on the belief that mutual vulnerability discourages a preemptive strike designed to disarm the opponent.

First-strike stability signifies a state of balance where neither side perceives an advantage in launching an attack against the other. During the Cold War, superpowers aimed for first-strike stability by focusing on the survivability of their strategic assets.

India and Pakistan entered the nuclear arena without prior experience or a comprehensive understanding of nuclear weapons' role in their security doctrines. Overtime, trial and error have enabled both nations to strengthen their nuclear institutions and exhibit some restraint in their policies.

However, the learning process has unfolded differently in each country, occurring at various levels and with varying degrees of progress. In South Asia, nuclear learning has yet to lead to stable relations. Although both India and Pakistan have avoided all-out war since becoming nuclear powers, serious crises such as the Kargil conflict, military standoffs, and terrorist attacks have threatened regional security.

Pakistan`s Nuclear Posture

Pakistan has not publicly disclosed its explicit nuclear doctrine but has issued limited official statements outlining facets of its nuclear policy. These statements avoid endorsing a No-First-Use (NFU) stance. Instead, Pakistan emphasizes credible minimum deterrence, focusing on deterring India's conventional military superiority.

Additionally, Pakistan introduced "full spectrum deterrence" (FSD) following the testing of its tactical nuclear missile, the Nasr, in response to India's Cold Start Doctrine. This doctrine aimed to seize Pakistani territories swiftly without triggering a nuclear response.

Although Pakistan maintains the option of first-use, it keeps the triggering "redlines" intentionally ambiguous to deter Indian aggression.

India's Nuclear Posture

India initially declared a No-First-Use (NFU) policy in 1999, but later, in 2003, introduced a caveat regarding potential biological or chemical attacks, reserving the option to respond with nuclear weapons.

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government, during its 2014 election campaign, indicated the intent to revise India's nuclear doctrine to address existing ambiguities and credibility concerns. The debate over India's NFU policy resurfaced, especially after statements by India's Defense Minister in 2016 that questioned NFU.

Similarly, discussions have arisen regarding India's "credible minimum deterrence" policy, with complexities arising from threats posed by both Pakistan and China

Conclusion

Nuclear weapons have become central to Pakistan's foreign and security policy as a means to counter India's military superiority. However, in the post-9/11 era, geo-economic and geopolitical factors have heightened Pakistan's sense of insecurity. India's partnerships with developed countries for advanced weapon systems have widened disparities, straining Pakistan's nuclear deterrence. This complex scenario increases the potential for miscalculations and escalations during crises.

In this context, Pakistan's deployment of short-range nuclear delivery systems and Tactical Nuclear Weapons (TNWs) is considered strategically essential to address multifaceted threats. Developing an offensive-defensive doctrine that integrates conventional and strategic nuclear forces becomes a rational approach to achieve a semblance of strategic stability in the absence of bilateral trust. Pakistan's unequivocal articulation of its doctrine and commitment to prevent future crises is crucial in deterring India from employing its substantial military capabilities against Pakistan.

The changing geopolitical landscape and the rapid advancements in technology are contributing to an increased level of regional instability. The growing proximity between China and Pakistan has heightened India's concern regarding the potential for a two-front conflict. As India continues to outpace Pakistan in terms of conventional military capabilities and strengthens its cooperation with the United States to counter the influence of a powerful China, there is a growing risk that leaders in Islamabad may opt for riskier strategies, such as investments in militant proxies and tactical nuclear weaponry.

Over the coming five to ten years, the emergence of cyber capabilities, artificial intelligence, unmanned systems, advanced missile defense systems, and cutting-edge delivery systems like hypersonic missiles will pose additional challenges for military strategists and political leaders in all three nations.

The extensive borders shared by these countries offer numerous opportunities for conflict, and the short distances involved, along with tight timelines for military actions, present formidable challenges for decision-makers who must operate with incomplete information. Hasty decisions in such circumstances could result in dire global consequences