Impact Analysis of Rising Strategic Instability on Nuclear Disarmament: Case Study of South Asia

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Abstract

The South Asian security dynamics – shaped by persistent bilateral conflicts between Pakistan and India, changing force postures, India’s continued aspirations to seek strategic supremacy, development and possible employment of emerging technologies, suspension of the composite dialogue process, and absence of concrete arms control between the two nuclear adversaries – increase the salience of nuclear deterrence in security doctrines and offer few prospects for arms control and disarmament. This paper offers an assessment of the strategic situation in the region and argues that the prevailing regional environment seems less favourable to nuclear disarmament and more inclined to arms racing. It suggests that the two nuclear adversaries in South Asia need to engage in meaningful dialogue and pursue an incremental approach to build trust, resolve outstanding disputes, promote nuclear restraint and hence enter into effective arms control mechanisms to eventually promote disarmament. This requires eschewing aspirations for strategic supremacy and reaching a consensus on mutual vulnerability as being the basic framework for deterrence stability between the two states. This approach may pave the way towards institutionalized measures to avoid war, promote an arms control culture and stabilize deterrence.

Keywords: Strategic instability, nuclear deterrence, arms control crisis, nuclear disarmament.

Introduction

South Asia is one of the most volatile regions of the world. As in previous decades, India’s strategic behaviour remains the key determinant of strategic stability in South Asia. The regional security situation is marred by decades-old bilateral disputes, growing dangers of military confrontation, the political leadership’s willingness to initiate crises for meagre electoral advantages as evidenced in the February 2019 crisis, evolution and military application of new technologies, doctrinal ambiguities and absence of arms control measures. Although nuclear deterrence in the region has ensured peace at the strategic level by
preventing the outbreak of full-scale conventional war in South Asia, yet peace remains fragile at the sub-strategic level and bilateral rivalry between Pakistan and India continues to persist.\(^1\)

The post-1998 crises between the two adversaries also suggest how the stability-instability paradox complicates regional security.\(^2\) These crises, including Kargil in 1999, Twin Peak crisis in 2001-2002, the Mumbai attack in 2008 and frequent violations of ceasefire along the Line of Control (LoC) exacerbated mutual mistrust. The Indian unverified claims of conducting retaliatory surgical strikes against Pakistan in the aftermath of the 2016 Uri attacks further aggravated regional insecurity. Likewise, the Pulwama attacks in 2019 again brought the two neighbours to the brink of another war when the Indian Air Force violated Pakistan’s air space by conducting strikes in Balakot.\(^3\) In August 2019, the Modi government deprived Indian Occupied Jammu and Kashmir (IOJ&K) of its autonomous status by revoking articles 370 and 35A of the Indian constitution and turning Kashmir’s status into two federal unions.\(^4\) This unilateral measure by the Indian government directly affected the course of this bilateral dispute and fuelled the existing intensity between the two states. Kamran Akhtar believes that ‘this [development] further undermined strategic stability and vitiated the security environment.’\(^5\) In addition to disturbed political relationships, modernization of nuclear forces and ambiguous doctrinal transformation have exacerbated crisis instability in South Asia. As a consequence of growing conventional and nuclear asymmetry between the two states, mutual trust diminishes and disarmament remains an ideal, less probable to be achieved in the region. This study explains that the prospects of nuclear disarmament in South Asia remain bleak as the regional security environment remains prone to


\(^{2}\) Robert Jervis, *The Illogic of American Nuclear Strategy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), p.31. Stability-instability paradox refers to a dilemma in which there is stability at the strategic level, but instability at the sub-strategic level

\(^{3}\) Zafar Nawaz Jaspal, *India’s Surgical Strike’ Stratagem, Brinksmanship and Response* (Islamabad: Khursheed Printers (Pvt) Ltd, 2019).


\(^{5}\) Author’s interview of Kamran Akhtar, Director General Disarmament at Pakistan’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 4 December 2019.
force modernization. It assesses the challenges that constrain the pursuit of the necessary environment required for promoting disarmament goals and also evaluates the prospects of enhancing mutual security in South Asia.

**Nuclear disarmament - a distant dream**

The first section identifies key factors that shape the strategic environment of South Asia and consequently undermine the prospects for disarmament. The subsequent section proposes a framework as to how the two states may focus on creating a new security environment leading to nuclear deterrence and strategic stability.

**Non-NPT status of India and Pakistan**

Promoting peaceful uses of nuclear technology, nuclear non-proliferation, and disarmament are the essential objectives of the treaty on the non-proliferation of nuclear weapons (NPT). To date, the treaty has partially prevented the proliferation of nuclear weapons and has almost failed to vehemently pursue nuclear disarmament. Despite limited success, the NPT has played a central role in preserving the nuclear order, which is evident from several factors. First, the NPT’s almost universal membership (191 states) has globalized and strengthened the non-proliferation process. Second, it encouraged states like Japan, Taiwan and South Korea to abandon their nuclear weapons programmes and helped to establish Nuclear Weapon Free Zones (NWFZs) in Southeast Asia, South America and Central Asia. It also urged Ukraine, Belarus, Kazakhstan and South Africa to join the treaty after giving up their nuclear weapons. This trend promoted transparency and Libya opened up its facilities to scrutiny by the US and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) in 2003. Although these countries voluntarily abandoned their nuclear weapon programmes, these measures considerably enhanced the significance and credibility of the treaty.

Third, state-owned political steps and social initiatives based on

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humanitarian principles have increased the universal acceptability of NPT’s agenda by contributing to normative support of the treaty. Few such measures include IAEA’s safeguards system that institutionalized nuclear transparency,\(^\text{10}\) multilateral export control regimes to ensure that exports do not contribute to the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, bilateral arms control treaties,\(^\text{11}\) particularly between the US and the former Soviet Union, President Obama’s nuclear security summit (NSS) initiative,\(^\text{12}\) the European Union’s non-proliferation and disarmament consortium, and international diverse voluntary movements suggested by Abbasi\(^\text{13}\) in her recent volume.

The joint efforts of non-nuclear weapon states (NNWS) and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have also reinforced the relevance of Article VI of the NPT.\(^\text{14}\) However, the nuclear non-proliferation regime, centred on the NPT, has failed to develop mutual trust among adversaries in South Asia and build a conducive environment to promote arms control and disarmament. In South Asia’s case, the inflexibility of the NPT has barred Pakistan and India from being mainstreamed into the global non-proliferation regime. South Asia’s two nuclear powers are considered among the ‘outsider’ and de facto nuclear weapons states, not to be integrated into the global nuclear order. Further, the non-signatory status to the NPT does not impose a similar legal commitment on Pakistan and India, like Article VI of the NPT that requires NPT-signatory nuclear weapon states to pursue cessation of the nuclear arms race and disarmament. These limitations signify the NPT’s non-universal status as both states considered it a discriminatory treaty and abstained from signing it.\(^\text{15}\) The NPT only recognizes five countries as legitimate

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\(^{14}\) Ibid.

\(^{15}\) Ahmer Bilal Soofi, ‘Pakistan,’ in Simon Chesterman, Hisashi Owada, and Ben Saul (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of International Law in Part III*
nuclear weapon states and restricts NNWS from acquiring nuclear weapons. This generated the perception that the treaty only aimed to preserve the interests of powerful states (P-5/de-jure). It also raised concerns that the NPT not only ignored the security concerns of regional states but also denied access to nuclear technology. However, Pakistan seems to be more affected by this aspect as it was treated with discrimination in comparison to other non-NPT states, especially India. This sense of discrimination further peaked in 2008 when the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) granted an exceptional waiver to New Delhi.

During the negotiations process, India maintained that the NPT creates an arbitrary division between nuclear haves and have-nots and lack of progress on nuclear disarmament by greater powers may encourage states like India to acquire their deterrent. Pakistan also maintained that its decision would be based on its national security considerations. Hence, it decided not to unilaterally sign the treaty unless India does so. During that time, Islamabad proposed seven initiatives to New Delhi to prevent the nuclearization of South Asia. The salient among these included the proposal to establish an NWFZ in South Asia in 1974; joint declaration renouncing the acquisition and manufacture of nuclear weapons in 1978; and, in the same year, proposed mutual inspections of nuclear facilities, simultaneous adherence to the NPT by both states and also simultaneous acceptance of full-scope IAEA safeguards. However, India refused to accept these proposals and continued working on the development of its nuclear weapons.

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23 Feroz Hassan Khan, op.cit., p. 121.
programme. After India conducted nuclear tests in 1974 and again in 1998, Pakistan felt compelled to restore strategic stability in the region and develop a nuclear deterrent as a national security imperative.

The reduced effectiveness of the NPT in South Asia with respect to disarmament may be explained by the following factors. One, the treaty gave no scope to security guarantees to Pakistan and India; two, it lacked the flexibility to recognize them as legitimate nuclear weapon states; three, it failed to foster mutual trust necessary to resolve intensified conflicts; four, the exceptional Nuclear Suppliers Group’s waiver to India in 2008, without it being a signatory to the NPT, has undermined the credibility of the treaty; and finally, despite the prevailing nuclear dangers in the region, the norms on arms control and disarmament established globally by the NPT could not inspire India to consider the proposals offered by Pakistan. The treaty remains less significant in South Asia also because of the bigger state’s approach towards disarmament. As Durrani argued, ‘nuclear disarmament is not beholden to South Asia alone. It has to be universal and across the board. The NPT recognized nuclear weapon states cannot be absolved of their responsibilities towards complete disarmament’.

Uncertain future of CTBT and proposed FMCT

The proposed Fissile Material Cut-Off Treaty (FMCT) seeks to impose a cut-off in the future production of weapons usable fissile material. Pakistan believes that seeking a cut-off only on future production of fissile material will only lead to asymmetry of stocks and, hence, the scope of any such treaty must also consider existing stockpiles. To this end, Pakistan proposed that the Fissile Material Treaty (FMT) should also take into account existing stockpiles. Although the US opposed

26 Author’s interview of Asif Durrani, former ambassador of Pakistan to Iran, 13 March 2021.
negotiations on FMCT on the pretext of verification provisions, there is a general perception that Pakistan has halted the beginning of negotiations on FMCT. Zamir Akram opposes this perception by arguing that ‘India is not keen on signing the FMCT. India supported the FMCT earlier in order for them to get the Nuclear Suppliers Group’s waiver and currently they are silent in order to secure NSG membership.’

He opines that New Delhi might use the NSG waiver to acquire adequate stock of fissile material and resume further testing afterwards. From Pakistan’s perspective, the following factors intensify the prevailing impasse in negotiations for the treaty. First, any prospective treaty on banning the production of fissile material should be negotiated in the Conference on Disarmament (CD). Secondly, FMCT may not be useful if considered as merely a measure to contain horizontal proliferation, instead of taking it as a concrete step towards disarmament and preventing vertical proliferation. Thirdly, ignoring the existing fissile material stockpiles may aggravate nuclear asymmetry in the region by putting Pakistan in a relatively disadvantageous position in comparison to India. Kamran Akhtar believes that the exceptional NSG waiver frees up New Delhi’s domestic fuel for weapon purposes and may accentuate asymmetries in South Asia. Thus, the undefined status of the FMCT with little focus on existing stockpiles make the disarmament debate irrelevant in South Asia. Kamran Akhtar stated that focusing on any such a treaty ‘will be a non-starter.’

Pakistan and India have declared unilateral moratoria on nuclear testing. India does not seem to have any intention to sign and ratify the CTBT and that resultantly shapes Pakistan’s decision to not sign the treaty. Zamir Akram emphasizes that Pakistan’s position to sign the CTBT remains conditional on New Delhi’s evolving nuclear posture that intends to keep the option of nuclear testing open and, if it tests, Pakistan could also revisit its conditional moratorium.

30 Author’s interview of Zamir Akram, op.cit.
32 Author’s interview of Zamir Akram, op.cit.
33 Statement by Zamir Akram, op.cit.
34 Author’s interview of Kamran Akhtar, op.cit.
37 Author’s interview of Zamir Akram, op.cit.
This approach of making Pakistan's position conditional upon India’s decision is based upon multiple factors. First, New Delhi’s intention to build a hydrogen bomb led to uncertainty regarding the sincerity of its commitment to pursue disarmament. Second, there is little incentive for Islamabad to sign the CTBT in the absence of any commitment to be recognized as a legitimate nuclear weapon state. Third, it is also not certain that Pakistan would receive any tangible international support for its peaceful nuclear programme. The preferential treatment to India in the form of an exceptional NSG waiver, without it being a signatory of major non-proliferation and disarmament related treaties, further fuels the pessimistic view of the non-proliferation regime. Finally, unilaterally joining the CTBT does not serve Pakistan’s national security purpose given India’s intention for further nuclear testing in the future. Joining and then leaving the CTBT because of India’s possible future nuclear tests would not be a logical move for Pakistan. Such a reversal would have a negative and costly impact as strategic pressure would be mounted on Islamabad to either comply with the regime or be ready for punitive sanctions.

With regard to the possibility of Pakistan unilaterally signing the CTBT, Akhtar argued, ‘In the face of Indian belligerence, no political government in Pakistan can afford to be seen making unilateral concessions.’ Riaz Khan said:

I see no prospect of India agreeing to sign the CTBT. Pakistan can upgrade its unilateral commitment to signing the treaty but with the caveat that under changed circumstances it could resume testing. The treaty provides for such a reservation. But for the time being, its unilateral commitment is sufficient, unless signing of the CTBT provides a substantive incentive.

In this scenario, the uncertainty around the future of the CTBT and the risk of India’s possible resumption of nuclear testing further add to the complexity of the disarmament debate in South Asia.

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40 Ibid.
41 Author’s interview of Kamran Akhtar, op.cit.
42 Author’s interview of Riaz Khan, former Foreign Secretary, Government of Pakistan (2019).
Exceptional NSG waiver and undermining prospects for disarmament

The US political decision to offer India access to the international nuclear market has raised concerns about the impartiality of the global non-proliferation regime and also undermined the prospects for disarmament. India can enjoy the benefits of the NPT states without adhering to commitments as required under the treaty. It is neither required to freeze further production of weapon-grade fissile material, sign and ratify the CTBT, comply with the IAEA’s full scope or comprehensive safeguards agreements, nor adhere to meaningful arms control measures. This exceptional treatment, without any additional legally binding commitment to pursue disarmament, has made India a stakeholder in the global non-proliferation regime, instead of being its target. Under its expansionist nuclear modernization programme, India is continuously producing huge quantities of fissile material for nuclear weapons production. New Delhi could ‘build a larger plutonium-production reactor to add a CIRUS and Dhruva, its two weapon-grade plutonium-production reactors at the Bhaba Atomic Research Centre in Bombay.’ Hence, it could increase the stockpiles of fissile material to expand its small-scale centrifuge enrichment programme and make highly enriched uranium for nuclear weapons. These aspects exacerbate Islamabad’s security concerns and Pakistani experts believe that it would have implications for the country’s position regarding disarmament in the region.

The following factors further explain how the exceptional NSG waiver aggravates Pakistan’s security dilemma. First, there has been no significant pressure on India from the US to segregate military and civilian nuclear facilities by placing all civilian facilities under the IAEA’s safeguards system. Hence, there will be little transparency regarding India’s use of fissile material for the production of nuclear weapons. Second, in the absence of any political pressure from the international community, India is unlikely to adhere to a legally binding disarmament-

43 Mark Hibbs, op.cit.
46 Mansoor Ahmed, op.cit., p. 29.
47 Author’s interview of Riaz Khan, op.cit.
related arrangement or even agree to sign the CTBT. Third, the complacent US approach towards India’s evolving nuclear posture also suggests that it will not influence India’s possible decision to test a hydrogen bomb. Fourth, the nuclear agreements with India impose no precondition on New Delhi to pursue arms restraint arrangements with Pakistan or China. Fifth, it legitimizes Indo-US strategic cooperation that gives a boost to India’s indigenous defence production. The modernization of defence capabilities and possible diversion of uranium will have grave consequences for the regional military balance and strategic stability. Sixth, the deal has opened a new debate about non-NPT states’ inclusion into NSG and a suitable criterion that may be required for them to acquire membership. In this context, Pakistan emphasizes the need to adopt a criteria-based approach, instead of discriminatory treatment, towards non-NPT states. Seventh, India’s record of diverting nuclear material acquired for peaceful uses raises concerns about possible diversion of material procured from other states to produce nuclear weapons. Lastly, the exceptional NSG waiver also elevates India’s political stature and contributes to its global aspirations like securing United Nations Security Council membership. Therefore, these aspects highlight how exceptional treatment for India by some NSG member states puts the disarmament agenda on the backburner and also exacerbates the security concerns of regional states.

Increased force modernization and declining prospects for disarmament

In the backdrop of a global power shift, the competing strategies between China and India, and India’s hedge against China continue to intensify. India’s quest for parity with China will have implications for India’s deterrent force posture in general and Pakistan’s nuclear strategy in particular.

In South Asia, India’s dismissive behaviour towards arms control and its expanding nuclear and conventional capabilities, along with aggressive strategic thinking, lead to arms race instability in the region. It is estimated that India currently possesses around 150 nuclear


India has four types of operational land-based nuclear ballistic missiles, including Prithvi-II and Agni-I (short-range); Agni-II (medium-range); and (intermediate-range Agni-III). The nuclear-armed Prithvi-II is capable to strike at a range of 250-350 km, while the dual-capable road-mobile Agni-I has a range of 700 km. India has also developed BrahMos, Pragati and Prahaar for tactical use. Nuclear capable Agni-II and Agni-III can strike at the range of 2,000 km and 3,200 km respectively. The Agni-IV possesses highly sophisticated technological features like composite rocket engines, improved stage separation and an advanced navigation system. India successfully tested the Agni-V ICBM in 2015, and reports suggest that it could carry multiple warheads. Reportedly, India has also started developing the Agni-VI ICBM. India recently test-fired the highly accurate Agni-P with a maximum range of up to 2,000 km. It signifies India’s growing counterforce targeting capabilities and experts believe that the Agni-P also reflects the erosion of New Delhi’s commitment to minimum deterrence and a steady shift towards a counterforce posture. India is currently also developing multiple targetable independent re-entry vehicles (MIRVs) and more manoeuvrable warheads. These developments raise doubts regarding India’s stated principle of ‘credible minimum deterrence and also raises questions if it aims to develop nuclear war fighting capabilities.’

India is modernizing its sea and land-based nuclear forces in its bid to develop a diverse nuclear arsenal. It is estimated that three or four squadrons of Mirage 2000H and Jaguar IS/ IB fighter-bombers have been assigned nuclear strike missions against adversaries. India is also

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51 Ibid, p. 220.
52 Zahir Kazmi, ‘SRBMs, Deterrence and Regional Stability in South Asia: A Case Study of Nasr and Prahaar’ (Islamabad: Institute of Regional Studies, October 2012), pp. 7-11.
54 Hans M. Kristensen and Matt Korda, op.cit., p. 221.
55 Ibid.
procuring 36 Rafale aircraft, which the French Air Force uses for nuclear missions. India received its first Rafale aircraft in October 2019, while the shipment of all the aircraft shall be completed by April 2022.\(^{59}\)

In the naval domain, India is building nuclear ballistic missile submarines (SSBNs) and ship launch ballistic missiles.\(^{60}\) The INS Arihant, the first SSBN, has completed the first deterrent patrol while the second submarine of this class is undergoing sea trials.\(^{61}\) While Arihant carries K-15 SLBM of 700 km range, the second class of SLBMs is K-4 that can strike targets in Pakistan and China at the range of 3,500 km. The K-4 would eventually replace K-15 as a potent delivery system in India’s sea-based nuclear forces. Defence Research and Development Organization (DRDO) is developing a K-5 SLBM of 5,000 km range, likely to be deployed on upcoming SSBNs.\(^{62}\) The K-5 would allow India to target Beijing from its eastern seaboard. While advanced capabilities are being developed, the Danish ballistic missile with 350 km range offers a stopgap measure to India.\(^{63}\)

India is also developing Nirbhay subsonic ground-launched cruise missiles having a range of up to 1,000 km. Its sea-launched and air-launched variants are being developed for SSBN and Su-30MK1 combat aircraft.\(^{64}\) In the domain of missile defence systems, the endo and exo-atmospheric missile defence system-designated Advanced Air Defence (AAD) and Prithvi Air Defence (PAD) are also being developed.\(^{65}\) Additionally, India has acquired the S-400 air defence system from Russia that can intercept short and medium-range ballistic and cruise missiles.

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\(^{59}\) Hans M. Kristensen and Matt Korda, op.cit., p. 219.


\(^{63}\) Ibid, p.1.

\(^{64}\) Raminder Kaur, op.cit., p. 5.

The US launched the Defence Technology and Trade Initiative (DTTI) in 2012\textsuperscript{66} to strengthen bilateral defence collaboration with India. Both sides have signed the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA) that enables sharing for refuelling, spare parts, and supplies.\textsuperscript{67} The two states have inked the Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA) that gives New Delhi access to critical defence technologies and communication networks to ensure interoperability between the two forces. They also signed the Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement\textsuperscript{68} in October 2020 that provides for sharing of geospatial intelligence. The two states have expanded their naval and maritime cooperation that includes exchanges between the Indian Navy and the US Naval Forces Central Command (NAVCENT). These agreements enhance India’s military capabilities and enable it to extend its operational reach in the so-called Indo-Pacific region. Kamran Akhtar argued: ‘Extra-regional powers have also pandered to this revisionist agenda by designating India as a net security provider.’\textsuperscript{69} These developments subsidize India’s strategic ambitions and offensive posture in the region that fuels arms race instability and leaves little space for arms control and disarmament.

**Pakistan’s growing military asymmetry reduces prospects for disarmament**

Pakistan considers India’s force modernization as offensive because it intensifies military asymmetries in the region, aggravates miscalculations and may lead to accidental war. Islamabad’s security posture is directly shaped by a few developments occurring in the region. First, the growing strategic cooperation between India and the US triggers Pakistan’s security dilemma. Secondly, the lack of communication and arms control arrangements between Pakistan and India undermine crisis stability and increase the likelihood of conflict escalation to the nuclear level. Thirdly, India’s development of hypersonic missiles bolsters its counterforce


\textsuperscript{68} Rohan Mukherjee, ‘Chaos as opportunity: The United States and world order in India's grand strategy,’ *Contemporary Politics*, Vol. 26, No. 4, 2020, pp. 420-438.

\textsuperscript{69} Author’s interview of Kamran Akhtar, op.cit.
targeting capability that further deepens anxiety in Pakistan. This indeed induces an arms race instability in the region.

It is estimated that Pakistan possesses 140-150 nuclear warheads. Its land inventory consists of 6 land-based ballistic missiles. When India introduced the Cold Start Doctrine (CSD) to contemplate limited warfare under the nuclear threshold, Pakistan developed short-range ballistic missile Nasr of 70-km range to offset CSD. The road-mobile Hatf-II, Hatf-III, and Hatf-IV ballistic missiles can strike targets at ranges of 180, 290 and 750 km respectively. The medium-range Shaheen-III ballistic missile, with a 2,750 km range, can target Indian Territory as far as the Andaman and Nicobar Islands.

Pakistan’s Air Force possesses F-16 A/B and Mirage III/V fighter squadrons for nuclear missions and has been used for test launches of the nuclear-capable Ra’ad cruise missile. Reportedly, Mirage’s aerial refuelling capability is being advanced to enhance its operational capability. Further, Pakistan has also developed JF-17 fighter aircraft to replace its ageing Mirage 5 and Mirage 5s. In the naval domain, Pakistan’s Naval Strategic Forces Command is the custodian of the country’s sea-based nuclear deterrence and a second-strike capability. In April 2018, Pakistan conducted a successful test of Babur-III, which is a nascent step towards the development of credible second-strike capability. Additionally, as a response measure to India’s ballistic missile defence systems, Pakistan has also developed the MIRV capable Ababeel ballistic missile.

As India’s nuclear forces expand, both qualitatively and quantitatively, at a fast pace, Pakistan feels compelled to respond and restore a strategic balance in the region. Lt. General (R) Khalid Kidwai

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71 Ibid., p. 353.
72 Yogesh Joshi and Frank O'Donnell, op.cit., p. 68.
73 Ibid., p. 25.
74 Hans M. Kristensen, Robert S. Norris, and Julia Diamond, op.cit., p. 352.
75 Ibid., p. 349.
77 ‘Keynote Address and Discussion Session with Lieutenant General (R) Khalid Kidwai at 7th IISS-Centre for International Strategic Studies (CISS) (Pakistan) Workshop on South Asian Strategic Stability: Deterrence, Nuclear Weapons and Arms Control,’ International Institute for Strategic Studies, 6 February
emphasizes that Pakistan must maintain a strategic balance in the nuclear and conventional equation with India, which is a key determinant of strategic stability in the region. Zamir Akram adds that Pakistan’s response to restore a balance is only qualitative in nature to ensure that deterrence remains stable and robust. In an environment where one side continuously expands its forces, intending to alter the balance in its own favour, an arms race instability grows to shrink space for the pursuit of nuclear disarmament.

**Changing force postures and effects on pursuit of disarmament**

The draft Indian Nuclear Doctrine (2003) emphasized Credible Minimum Deterrence (CMD) and adherence to the policy of No-First-Use (NFU) of nuclear weapons. India also claimed to keep its nuclear arsenal at low alert levels to promote non-war fighting trends. As part of its NFU policy, India defused the possibility of first strikes which was costly for India as it lacked adequate capabilities. New Delhi also emphasized that nuclear retaliation in response to the first use of nuclear weapons by the adversary will be massive to cause unacceptable damage to the adversary.

With expanding nuclear forces and modernized delivery systems, India’s strategic thinking moves away from doctrinal commitments of minimum deterrence and NFU to counterforce targeting strategy that may contemplate a pre-emptive first strike against Pakistan, if not China. Improving technology and missile accuracy may entice India to strike against the adversary’s nuclear forces, including command, control and communication infrastructures. Because of technological developments in India, Pakistan must maintain a strategic balance.

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78 Author’s interview of Zamir Akram, op.cit.
79 Ibid.
advancements, the counterforce option seems doctrinally permissible and strategically advantageous. This raises concerns in Islamabad that India may not hesitate to initiate a crisis and employ nuclear weapons in a conflict scenario. This apprehension was justified during the February 2019 crisis when the Indian Navy confirmed the deployment of nuclear submarines along with a carrier battle group. Riaz Khan sees counterforce strategies as a fig leaf to justify ambitious nuclear modernization which presages arms competition and has destabilizing consequences.

Adoption of such a war-fighting posture leads to aggravating power asymmetry and arms competition in South Asia. By undermining trust in India’s doctrinal commitments, India’s evolving nuclear posture exacerbates Pakistan’s security dilemma. Akram believes that India might use counterforce posture to re-establish its CSD, which was neutralized by full-spectrum deterrence of Pakistan. Hence, New Delhi’s temptation towards counterforce intensifies arms competition in the region and contributes to crisis instability and first-strike instability between Pakistan and India. Instead of addressing threats confronting strategic stability, these trends only aggravate the salience of nuclear weapons and implicate prospects for nuclear disarmament.

**Arms control crisis and diminishing prospects for disarmament**

Confidence Building Measures (CBMs) between India and Pakistan only serve the limited objective of managing crises. These measures have failed to pave the way towards developing a greater understanding of mutual threats and addressing unresolved bilateral disputes. Moreover, these measures also have limited utility in creating an enabling environment for discussion on nuclear arms control and disarmament. The hotline between the Directors General of Military Operations (DGMOs), the Agreement on Pre-Notification of Flight Testing of Ballistic Missiles, and the Agreement on Reducing the Risks from Accidents Relating to Nuclear Weapons were the salient measures

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86 Author’s interview of Riaz Khan, op.cit.
87 Author’s interview of Zamir Akram, op.cit.
between the two states after the Lahore Declaration in 1999. However, India lacks the willingness to engage in meaningful dialogue to resolve disputes that remain the root cause of strategic instability in the region. In recent months, the heightening tensions around the Kashmir dispute after the Modi government’s unilateral revocation of articles 370 and 35A further amplified this gap that intensifies crisis instability in the region.

India refused to accept the Strategic Restraint Regime (SRR) as proposed by Pakistan in 1999. It sought to address three interlocking aspects: a) nuclear restraint; b) conventional balance; c) resolution of core disputes, especially Jammu and Kashmir. For meagre electoral gains, successive political governments in India have shied away from engaging in meaningful dialogue with Pakistan. This disinterest adds to frustration and CBM fatigue in Pakistan. Zamir Akram says, ‘Negotiations does not fit with Modi’s fascist ideology [and] currently there is no western pressure on India to resume dialogue with Pakistan due to their shifted political goals from South Asia to Asia-Pacific.’ Hence, the possibility of resumption of dialogue between the two neighbours remains bleak. Further, the absence of regional arms control arrangements have curtailed space for arms restraint. This, in turn, encourages Indian leadership to adopt an aggressive posture and offensive military doctrines with increased arms racing problems. These trends diminish political interest to explore prospects for developing consensus on nuclear disarmament.

**Way forward**

India and Pakistan may adopt an incremental approach to reduce bilateral tensions. Constructive engagement to resolve outstanding disputes may lead to reaching a consensus on nuclear disarmament. Kamran Akhtar believes that reaching a consensus on disarmament requires the following steps: willingness to resolve outstanding bilateral

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92 Author’s interview of Zamir Akram, op.cit.

disputes, eschewing aggressive doctrines and postures, the pursuit of arms control arrangements, and positive role of extra-regional powers to not adopt any discriminatory approach towards regional states.\textsuperscript{94} The section below suggests a few measures as a step-by-step approach to create an environment for nuclear disarmament.

\textit{Identify mutual threats}

Competing interests among states gradually lead to strategic rivalry.\textsuperscript{95} On the other hand, recognizing mutual threats posed to stability between two adversaries leads to arms control.\textsuperscript{96} Hence, as also evident from the Cold War, peaceful coexistence requires exploring a common framework for a stable relationship. Pakistan and India must enter into negotiations to identify common threats confronting stability in South Asia and recognize dangers that threaten stability in the region. If one of the adversaries continues to pursue strategic supremacy, avoid mutual vulnerability and explore space for limited war under a nuclear overhang, arms control and disarmament would remain a distant dream. Therefore, it is imperative to acknowledge that mutual vulnerability can be a framework that may ensure a stable deterrent relationship between the nuclear adversaries.\textsuperscript{97} Both states must engage in a strategic dialogue that aims to identify key misperceptions regarding each other’s nuclear doctrine and strategy. Sincere engagement in such processes may help to explore potential areas of cooperation to reduce dangers and pursue arms control measures. On the other hand, the absence of bilateral communication only aggravates the dilemmas of interpretation and response.

\textit{Promote nuclear restraint}

Strategic dialogue involving military leadership can pave the way towards a mechanism to address asymmetries and promote nuclear restraint. Riaz Khan proposes that Pakistan and India may consider formal measures to manage crises and reduce risks.\textsuperscript{98} Any such efforts should focus on both conventional and nuclear capabilities, along with dangerous doctrines, as these factors contribute to an unstable

\textsuperscript{94} Author’s interview of Kamran Akhtar, op.cit.
\textsuperscript{98} Author’s interview of Riaz Khan, op.cit.
environment, leading to escalation. Maleeha Lodhi, Pakistan’s former Permanent Representative at the United Nations proposes that as a starter, Pakistan and India should engage in discussions on threat perceptions, force configurations, military capabilities and postures, and military doctrines, to ensure greater transparency to reduce risk. A mutual belief on the dangerous consequences of the use of nuclear weapons can pave the way towards reduced reliance on nuclear weapons.

In the aftermath of the February 2019 crisis, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi threatened with Qatal ki Raat (the night of the murder) and also asserted that nuclear weapons were there to use. Hence, an agreement not to attack each other’s early warning and other command, control and communication-related infrastructure can be a step towards promoting escalation control stability in South Asia. Similarly, irresponsible statements by political leadership that increase war hysteria among the masses may also be avoided. In this context, the following institutionalized measures may be explored to promote restraint: non-development and non-deployment of BMD systems, restraint on the development of MIRVs and low-yield nuclear weapons, non-development of ICBMs, non-deployment of weapons in outer space, and strategic dialogue on periodic assessment of evolving threats like cyber attacks.

**Nuclear Confidence Building Measures (NCBMs)**

Adopting a regional approach to ensure transparency about doctrines, strategic thinking and force posture developments may pave the way towards promoting arms race stability in the region. Such a framework would directly promote disarmament related norms. Notwithstanding the existing mistrust in South Asia, both states may consider starting with the exchange of information about clarifying the strategic or conventional role of dual-capable missile systems. Transparency also requires a dialogue on each other’s perceived nuclear thresholds that may encourage a start towards readiness and deployment of nuclear weapons. Enhanced transparency may help nuclear adversaries to stabilize deterrence and

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enhance mutual trust. In this context, the following specific institutionalized measures may be explored to promote crisis stability: restraint on increased readiness levels of the nuclear arsenal, revival of bilateral hotlines for effective communication between military leaders, and eschewing aggressive military doctrines under the nuclear overhang.

*Bilateral non-proliferation agreement*

The following steps may be considered in this regard: a) bilateral moratorium on non-testing of nuclear weapons; b) initiate dialogue on possible separation of military and civilian nuclear facilities and putting all civilian nuclear facilities under IAEA safeguards; and c) linking these terms to prospective criteria for NSG membership of non-NPT states.\(^{101}\) Kamran Akhtar argues that ‘there is no appetite for the revision of the NPT to accommodate the reality of nuclear weapon states outside the NPT. Under these circumstances the best options appear to be parallel, agreed and non-discriminatory criteria for mainstreaming of the non-NPT states and commitments by the non-NPT states that are equivalent to the obligations of the NPT NWS, in return for the same rights.’\(^{102}\)

The proposed measures highlighted above may strengthen mutual understanding about the need to bolster deterrence stability by addressing underlying risks that would eventually foster arms control and disarmament related efforts in the region.

**Conclusion**

The prevailing security environment of South Asia is marred by outstanding disputes, the legacy of wars and military skirmishes, and the aggressive military posture of India that seeks strategic supremacy over its relatively weaker neighbour. In this environment, the goal of pursuing disarmament seems hard to achieve. India’s nuclear modernization efforts, doctrinal ambiguities, and changing force posture compel Pakistan to respond and stabilize deterrence. This dynamic, along with an absence of concrete arms control mechanisms and adequate mutual trust, leads to arms competition in South Asia, making negotiations on nuclear disarmament difficult to pursue. This study suggests that the two nuclear adversaries in South Asia need to engage in meaningful dialogue and pursue an incremental approach to build trust, resolve outstanding disputes, promote nuclear restraint and hence enter into effective arms

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\(^{102}\) Authors’ interview of Kamran Akhtar, op.cit.
control mechanisms to eventually promote disarmament. This requires eschewing aspirations for strategic supremacy and reaching a consensus on mutual vulnerability as being the basic framework for deterrence stability between the two states. This approach may pave the way towards institutionalized measures to avoid war, promote an arms control culture and stabilize deterrence.