



NUCLEARIZATION OF SOUTH ASIA: ROLE OF EXTRA REGIONAL POWERS

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Abstract

Since independence in 1947, a constant state of antagonism and enmity has generally been observed between Pakistan and India. Even the so called 'Peaceful phases' were uneasy and short lived. An analyst Asley Tellis coined a term "ugly stability" as both the nations entangled themselves in three wars in 1948, 1965 and 1971 against each other. Moreover, number of low intensity escalations which had full tendency to drive the region towards full scale conflict. Thus the threat perception and security dilemma in the south Asia make it easier for the extra regional powers to interfere and use the regional powers for their own vested interests in one way or the other. This study aims to analyze that how far the extra regional powers are responsible for nuclearizing south Asia?



This research study has opted for the qualitative methods, to make the study more representative and purposeful both primary as well as secondary sources have been used.

Key words: Nuclear deterrence, security dilemma, threat perception.

Introduction

South Asia comprises eight states, Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Nepal, Bhutan, Srilanka, Bangladesh and Maldives. However, being located in the center of South Asia, India occupies crucial strategic location. With 7500 km long coastline in Indian Ocean, she enjoys extra ordinary economic and geographical advantages, even up to the level of frustration for the smaller states around its borders. This reality makes South Asia an 'Indian locked' for neighboring countries which limit the regional connectivity. The neighboring countries can either meet at a third country or they have to cross India, resulting in least integration among the South Asian countries and low socio-economic prosperity. This limitation of the region has usually been exploited by the major powers in one way or another and used region with Indian-centric approach while ignoring the smaller states (Gordon Flake et al, 2017). However, the case is different when it comes to Pakistan, who enjoys important geo-strategic location in south Asia up to the level of frustration particularly for the India. As Afghanistan, the meeting point for three regions of the world, (South Asia, Central Asia and West Asia) is a landlocked country and Pakistan provides it the most favorable access through Arabian sea. For the reason Pakistan became important ally of United States in both Afghan wars (during and after cold war).

More interestingly around 37% of the world's poorest population reside over here (as almost 2 billion people are bound to live below the poverty line). However, the two 'neighboring nuclear powers' of the region India and Pakistan (collectively) are the biggest recipient of international arms industry. Both are collectively importing 18% of the total global arms and spending billions of dollars on accumulating heaps of weapons out of their meager resources (SIPRI Year Book 2017: Armaments, Disarmament and International Security, 2017). It is assumed that the study will be helpful to answer that whether nuclearization has played effective role in stabilizing the region or it has further destabilized the region.

Nuclearization of South Asia and the role of extra-regional powers can be assessed only by understanding the significance and sensitivity of this region for the rest of the world. South Asia is the most densely populated region in the world and is home to almost one third of the total global population. So the nuclear conflict in the region will directly affect this one third of the global population. Moreover, China which is the largest



populated country in the world will also face the direct consequences, as it shares a direct and long border with south Asian countries (roughly population of China and South Asian countries constitute around 50% of the global population). Secondly the part of Arabian sea and Indian ocean, which has been owned by south Asian countries is highly significant for the global trade. As it provides a route to more than 60% of the international oil trade throughout the year. Any nuclear conflict in south Asia will have dire consequences for global oil trade (which will directly affect the global industry). Thirdly, China and the south Asian countries are the major suppliers of wheat and rice (which are the basic food necessity for the entire world). In short the peace or conflict conditions in South Asia have direct implications for the rest of the world.

The vulnerability to the ethnic, sectarian & religious conflicts, continuous cross border terrorism, military antagonism among major regional powers, nuclearization, historical intra-state conflicts and rivalries, along with the widespread and systematic human rights violations are the unprecedented threats to the regional peace (Ahmed & Bhatnagar, 2008; Bhatta, 2004). According to Pew Research Centre analysis of 198 countries, the three major countries of South Asia ranked among the top 10 religiously unrest nations of the world and placed India on fourth, Afghanistan on eighth and Pakistan on tenth positions (Pew Research Center, 2014). These limitations of the region have usually been exploited by the major powers in one way or another (Gordon Flake et al, 2017). Let's examine the contribution of major powers in nuclearizing south Asia.

1. United States of America

Since the creation, Pakistan remained gripped in the security dilemma due to the perceived existential threat from India. Due to which it remained a part of many controversial military alliances like SEATO, CENTO, and major ally of the U.S in first Afghan war against USSR and managed to extract many economic and military concession (particularly regarding its nuclear program discussed in detail, earlier in this study).

By the end of the cold war, the US is aimed to maintain its influence in South Asia and the Indian Ocean for strategic reasons. A considerable cooperation and relations between India, Japan and US, developed a maritime trinity (it has slightly weakened the strategic importance of Pakistan for US, though US still has limited options beside Pakistan, due to its dependence on Pakistan to achieve its interests in Afghanistan). This strategic alliance is due to a strategic convergence among the three nations, mainly to counter growing Chinese influence and power in the region. This has led to an undeclared 'Maritime Cold War' in South Asia. According to Ex. Naval Chief of Sri Lanka, Dr. Jayanath Colabage,



“The development projects funded by China in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), with a special focus on South Asia, are not viewed favorably by India, Japan and the US, especially maritime related ones, in India’s immediate neighborhood like in Sri Lanka, Pakistan, the Maldives and Bangladesh. As the US is still the most dominant maritime power in the Indian Ocean (IO) and is carrying out Freedom of Navigation Operations (FNOPs) in the Western Pacific Ocean and aspires to be the global policeman in the IO as well. The U.S Cooperative Strategy for 21st Century Sea Power describes the area of their focus, the so-called Indo-Asia Pacific (Colambage, 2018). U.S has shown very unambiguous plans to deploy 60 per cent of their maritime force capabilities to maintain security in this region (O'Rourke, 2020). Despite the fact that India has the biggest navy in the region, still depends on the US to act as a guarantor of maritime security.

As in this context, India is expected to serve the purpose of acting as a strategic hedge for U.S in the region to contain Chinese influence (Khan, 2017). In prevailing conditions smaller countries like Nepal, Bhutan, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh (already under Indian influence) are caught up in a strategic dilemma. However, the case is bit different for Pakistan who remained a part of many controversial alliances to counter the mighty Indian influence in the region and will further look towards to invite other major powers of the world for its survival (Pant, 2017). Pakistan’s fears of Indian aggression have been multiplied due to the burgeoning strategic relationship between India and U.S. One of the major development under Manmohan Singh’s premiership was the US-India civil nuclear deal concluded in 2005. The deal not only permitted the acquisition of nuclear material for civilian purposes under IAEA safeguards but also unlocked the prospects for India’s membership of Nuclear Supplier Group (NSG) without any compulsion of signing the NPT. Moreover, after signing the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement, United States designated India, its Major Defense Partner in June 2016. Consequently, the bilateral defense trade grew approximately \$ 16 billion which was previously almost zero in 2008. Similarly, new Indo-US defense agreement, Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (BECA) signed in 2020 is perceived as military challenge by the Islamabad. As the latter lost almost all the military assistance from US.

Pakistan has boosted its defense build-up due to this sense of insecurity or security dilemma. Pakistan’s force posture and deterrence strategy has geared to counter the worst-case scenario which includes enormous military capabilities of India along with the support from U.S in case of any conflict. Many members in national security establishment of Pakistan think that Islamabad must get prepared for two worst case scenarios, preemptive strike from India and in other case, a strike from US on behalf of India.



The official position of Pakistan since 1998 remained very unambiguous that its deterrence is 'Indian centric'. This clear-cut position has provided legitimacy to Islamabad for developing ballistic and cruise missiles to bring all Indian territories under targets. Though China being the major defense partner of Pakistan, collaborating to minimize vulnerability to their common rival India. So it is proclaimed that Inter-Continental Ballistic Missiles will prove deterrent for Pakistan in case of second case scenario.

Political analysts feared that this competition for influence and power in West Asia, Asia Pacific and especially in South Asia could be disastrous. As South Asia will become a chessboard for major powers and will negatively impact the socio-political and economic progress of South Asia as it did in the past.

Three extensive and comprehensive inconsistencies have been pointed out by Dr. Rabia regarding the U.S nonproliferation policy. Firstly, U.S has skillfully maintained consistent double-standards policy, on non-proliferation in South Asia by pushing both New Delhi and Islamabad for the same violation. Secondly, it is commonly believed in Pakistani establishment that her legitimate needs for civil nuclear technology have been "thwarted since the 1970s whereas India was rewarded for its proliferation behavior by several U.S. administrations" and 'Indo-U.S nuclear deal' and U.S backing for India's membership in NSG are the foremost examples. Moreover, the Washington's support for New Delhi is irritating to Islamabad as "India's nuclear export control regime and the safety and security of its nuclear installations (as compared to Pakistan) has poor record based on several reported cases of nuclear thefts and security breaches" (Robina, Mustafa, Imran, 2019). Jaspal claimed in 2018 in one of the article that there are 56 uranium theft cases been registered in India (Jaspal, 2018). Moreover, India's command and control system has major structural flaws and contradictions in what India wants to do and what it can do. Additionally, the point to be noted is that "U.S Nuclear Posture Review 2018" itself is threatening, impulsive and aggressive. As "U.S Nuclear Posture Review 2018" seems expanding nuclear weapons' role in Washington's nuclear security strategy instead of reducing it. A new terminology has been introduced is "non-nuclear strategic attacks" and without any explanation. It is being feared that consolidation of non-nuclear capabilities by US to counter the non-nuclear scenarios can open the similar options for other countries of the world as well. As US plans to upgrade and replace its nuclear triad by spending 1.25 trillion dollars in next three decades (Lonsdale, 2019).

Critics have rightly raised the questions that "in the presence of approximately 4000 operational nuclear weapons along with the 1000 low yield nuclear weapons, why lower yield weapons are required by Washington to signal the credibility of its deterrence towards Russia and perhaps China. What does this expansion in US nuclear arsenal –



modernization of nuclear triad, lowering of nuclear threshold to include nuclear first use against non-nuclear strategic attacks – mean for the non-proliferation regime?” (Siracusa, 2018).

This evolving environment become threatening not for United States but for the other countries. As it may raise a question, that if more nuclear weapons are required by super power US then comparatively smaller nuclear weapon countries would require even more to ensure their security and perhaps this is the most harmful lesson.

New Delhi tried to mimic the Washington post 9/11 behavior by saying that if it is legitimate for US to Kabul to avenge 9/11 then why not India opt for the similar option against Pakistan to avenge 2001 Indian Parliament attack. While idealizing Washington, this type grand thinking and then following the footprints will have consequences for the efforts to maintain the strategic parity in south Asia.

An Indian military officer (who was the part of military planning) revealed that “India had assured Washington in the event of war, it would give the American bases at Jacobabad, Pasni and Dalbandin close to the Afghan border wide berth.” (Bedi, 2002). The restrained during the longest ever stand-off between India and Pakistan in 2001-02 was not due to the nuclear deterrence. In fact, it was the active US involvement which refrained New Delhi from attacking Islamabad. India was trying to forge a “grand-strategic partnership” with US in Post-Cold War Era in general and in post-detonation era in particular, when Bush assume his office in 2001. It was due to the fact that Bush administration declared India as one of its “strategic goals”.

However, 9/11 badly complicated US choices in South Asia as Islamabad became a fundamental strategic asset once again in Afghanistan in war against terror. Though New Delhi tried hard to exhibit Washington that Islamabad is not the part of solution rather she was a crucial and major part of the whole problem in war against terrorism. Thereafter, New Delhi realized the limitations of its strategic partnership with Washington as US could not afford taking any risk in its new-fangled relation with Islamabad. Additionally, US forces were also deployed in many parts of Pakistan and in case of Indo-Pak war, there were fair chances of damages to them, which may prove disastrous for nascent Indo-US strategic partnership (Bedi, 2002). After meeting the representatives of four out of five permanent members of Security Council (UK, US, China, Russia), New Delhi administration was convinced to show restraint and moderate behavior. Thus for the sake of its grand goals and the prospects of Washington disapproval affected New Delhi’s calculations and eventually persuaded Indian administration to stop the drift of war.



Subsequently, New Delhi carefully structured its anti-terrorist operations but also engaged extensively in publicity and diplomatic campaign to compel Pakistan to roll back its policy on Kashmir. In order to persuade the world opinion in general and US in particular that Islamabad's involvement or linkages with the terrorist organizations are as equally threatening for global security as is for India (Dawn, 2001). New Delhi projected the entire freedom struggle of Kashmir as "terrorist movement" engineered by Islamabad and placed its demands in a legal way to extract concession in prevailing global conditions. Consequently, Washington intervened and persuade Musharraf to take actions against LeT, JeM and stop Cross-LoC movement of Kashmiri insurgents. On the other hand, in the wake of the prevailing international conditions, Islamabad being the major US ally in war against terror also secured tremendous strength and contained many India's moves.

Similarly, Bombay and Srinagar 2006 bombing derailed the Peace Process, though the attacks were immediately condemned by Islamabad and called it "despicable act of terrorism" (Dawn, 2006). U.S pressed both India and Pakistan to continue the 'Peace Talk' and offered help in investigating the blasts. Furthermore, Washington took even more balanced approach towards the Mumbai Blasts and showed hesitation in accepting India's narrative that Pakistani based terrorist organizations were behind the attacks. Boucher emphasized that "Some of the groups that are suspected in these bombings are actually outlawed in Pakistan." He further added that "We need to see if there are sources of terrorism in other countries ... we need to work with those countries and try and move things forward so that we can get to these groups" (Dawn, 2006). During a press briefing State Department spokesman Sean McCormack while answering a journalist said that "India had no evidence to accuse Pakistan for the Mumbai blasts." Finally, Indian PM Manmohan and President Musharraf decided to resume dialogues after their meeting in sidelines of the Havana Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) summit on September 16, 2006.

Though the resumption of peace talk was applauded by all important capitals of the world including Washington and Beijing however the talks remained failed to extract any break-through for South Asia. Meanwhile the next blasts occurred in the train service named 'Samjhota Express' running between India and Pakistan on February 19, 2007 killed 68 travelers mostly from Pakistan. Musharraf said that "We will not allow elements which want to sabotage the ongoing peace process and succeed in their nefarious designs" (Dawn, 2008).

2. France

Though India and France have developed cordial relations and cooperating in all major domains since 1947. Though the relations faced few setbacks during cold war however the two countries improved their relations once again after cold war. The strategic



Partnership Agreement 1998 was and Civil Nuclear Agreements of 2008 were the notable breakthrough which extended the relations in strategic to defense and security domains.

France not only supported India's permanent membership in United council but also its membership of export control regimes like Wassenaar Arrangement, Australia Group, Missile and Technology Control Regime. France actively participated in developing consensus among regime members and was the first to enter into a civil nuclear cooperation agreement with New Delhi. When the latter was given extraordinary NSG waiver in 2008. Reports have revealed that France is interested in strengthening its trails by building "nuclear-powered attack submarines" an ambitious Indian project. During the visit to France in November 2017, Indian Naval Chief was given a detailed presentation on Barracuda class whose LEU fueled Nuclear-Powered attack submarine (SSN). According to the reports India has been developing indigenous SSBNs (Arihant and Aridhaman) with the help of Moscow. Although the transfer of nuclear delivery system to any other country is prohibited according to the laws of NPT and under START, SSBNs are considered as nuclear weapon system. Hence, any such transfer would be considered as violation of the NPT.

After intense negotiations for almost half a year, France and India successfully managed a significant defense deal of multiple capable Rafale jets. After that France will provide 36 fighter aircrafts to India for 8.8 billion dollars (out of which 11 jets are handed over to India so far). The aircrafts have capability to carry out all combat aviation missions including close air support, air superiority, anti-ship strike, air defense and the nuclear delivery. The Rafale Jets with multiple capabilities would play a decisive role in India's pursuits for the aggressive doctrines for which superiority is desirable. The political analysts think that the jets would not only be detrimental for the stability of south Asia but the deal has also raised many questions over the France's observance to Non Proliferation Treaty.

There are great apprehensions present among the South Asian nations and for the neighboring regions that nuclear capable jets will enhance offensive capabilities of India particularly for Pakistan. Moreover, it is feared that it will further accelerate the nuclear arms race in South Asia and other countries in the region particularly Islamabad will consult for the counter-balancing options in the strategic landscape of the South Asia. According to the Strategic analysts, it can be defined, only through the complex triangular interaction between China-Pakistan-India. The region is the most unique part of the world as three nuclear armed states share the neighborhood. Moreover, the unresolved borders conflicts, strategic, military issue extended over the years among India-China-Pakistan have intensified the antagonism and made the security environment extremely fragile.



3. Republic of China

Sino-Pak have a history of strong strategic ties extended over almost six decades. Though the relations emerged during 1950s however, it deepened more profoundly during Indo-China hostility during 1960s. It is widely believed that the Sino-Pak friendship which is generally named as “all-weather friendship” “higher than mountains and deeper than oceans” is based on the phenomena of “the enemy’s enemy is a friend”. Moreover, the friendship is based on mutual interests. As Pakistan remained always in the dire need of an iron umbrella from a stronger ally in the region or beyond to counter its perceived existential threat. Similarly, Beijing policy towards Islamabad is driven by its interest on two levels: countering India in the region on one hand and diverting India’s military force and strategic focus away from Beijing on the other hand. Hussain Haqqani one of the senior diplomat stated that, “For China, Pakistan is a low cost secondary deterrent to India while for Pakistan, China is a high value guarantor of security against India” (Pande, 2015).

Currently Pakistan is the largest receipt of Beijing’s arms industry and importing almost 35% of it’s total arms exports, including ballistic missiles and aircrafts along with the conventional weaponry since early 90s. Similarly, almost 70% of aircrafts, naval ships and Main Battle Tanks of Pakistan’s Armed Forces are acquired from Beijing (Raska, 2020). Beijing is being persistently alleged by New Delhi for the transfer or assistance provided to Islamabad in the development of the Nuclear Program of Pakistan.

4. Russia

Russia had historical role in south Asia due to its “special strategic partnership” with India since 1947. The relationship was built on five major components: political, diplomatic, civil nuclear energy cooperation, defense and anti-terrorism. Russia extended its support for the India’s pursuit for independent international stature, along the changing geo-strategic and security conditions of the region. According to the strategic and political analysts, pattern of Indo-Soviet military cooperation during 1947-90 was a product of Washington’s lack of attention towards New Delhi. Colney thinks that the foundation of this close Indo-Soviet relationship is more an opportunistic in nature rather than enduring or special relationship. He claimed that, “India’s needs are a match for Soviet capabilities, and Soviet needs are a match for India’s strengths” (Conley, 2000).

After the worst outcomes of 1962 Sino-India war, India failed to secure arms transfer contracts with West and turned to Soviet to fulfill its dire needs. India found the terms and conditions favorable, both financially as well as for production licensing.



Indeed, India followed its own national interests and initiated atomic energy program with Soviet Union in mid-60s rather than joining any one specific camp in bipolar cold-war settings.

India is among the top importer of Russian weaponry and receipting extensive help in the creation of “credible nuclear traid” (Conley, 2001). The most controversial area is the military assistance received in the development of indigenous nuclear-powered submarines and submarines-launched ballistic missile (SLBM). India rented Soviet Charlie-I Class SSN for three years in 1988 under the Advanced Technological Vessel (ATV) Program. According to US State Department reports, India developed “Sagarika” with the Moscow’s help. Although the transfer of technology for the military objectives is serious violation of several international treaties (Conley, 2000).

Conclusion

The Washington remains a top arms exporter in the world and holds a leading position in exporting military equipment to its allies. Moreover, in order expand and to sustain its military-industrial complex, US is striving to create new opportunities. Hence for that purpose Indian defense market has lot of attraction for US defense contractors. During the last one decade of 21st century “US became the 2nd largest arms supplier of India” (Dawn, 2003).

On May 20th, 2017 the local companies (private) are given the permission to work with foreign players by the Modi administration, to develop high-tech defense equipment within India. Additionally, \$ 250 billion have been announced to be used by government for the upgradation and modernization of armed forces in next one decade. The announcement is an extremely striking for the western military complexes therefore New Delhi will be endeavored by the western governments to revamp the military doctrine and purchase more advanced and sophisticated military weapons (Dawn, 2017).

After nuclear detonation in 1998, New Delhi has been endeavoring to “maximize its strategic advantages” due to its rapidly growing economy. India spent considerable amount on military hardware purchases from advanced countries whereas, Islamabad is critically engaged in menace of terrorism. Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) fact sheet indicates that India remained the top importer of the global “major arms industry” in 2007-11 with 9.7 percent imports. Whereas, its arms imports increased in 2012-16 and accounted for 13 percent of the global total. Similarly, the trend continued on the similar pattern from 2017-19 and India imports kept on increasing. The imports are far higher than its regional adversaries China and Pakistan. Moreover, imports from France



and Israel increased by 715 and 175 respectively. (Aude Fleurant Pieter D Wezeman, 2016). In 2017, \$ 250 billion was announced by Prime Minister Modi for the upgradation of armed forces in the next decade. This ambitious plan of military purchases spree made India and its military bureaucracy for the global military complexes. Mark Magnier thinks that “fueled by superpower ambitions and rivalry with China but hampered by a creaky domestic defense industry, India is on a military buying spree that’s made it the belle-of-the-global-military ball” (Magnie, 2012). This massive investment in defense hardware or defense systems has not only increased the probability of military adventurism but also provided legitimacy to the counter military pile-ups for others countries in the region. On one hand this legitimacy for buying more sophisticated and advance military technologies from the advance countries (like France, US, Russia, China and many others) made the regional countries most attractive to the arms and nuclear technology sellers (without considering the consequences). On the other hand, due to the weaker security systems, the threat for nuclear theft (by the terrorists) is increasing tremendously.



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