

# Nuclear Security Architecture of South Asia

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**Abstract:-** The South Asian region has long been held hostage to strategic uncertainty owing to the bellicose ties between its two biggest constituents, India and Pakistan. The nuclear status of these two countries poses grave dangers to the existential security of the region at large and has a direct destabilizing effect. Interestingly, the role of China has grown significantly in the nuclear security mix of the region in recent years. This aspect of nuclear security *vis-a-vis* the political games played by nuclear nations amidst the small states in a post colonial region that doesn't pay heed to its cultural milieu needs to be taken into examination. The continental security challenge faced by India on accounts of the Chinese incursion and the role of deterrence should also be taken into account. The paper begins by addressing the dynamics of India and Pakistan in the nuclear mix and also analyses China's standpoint in the region. It shifts to critically explicate the shared dynamics of the three powers in the region leading to the variable of security/insecurity. Towards the end the paper would lead to address the dimensions of hard power politics which stands in contrast to the critical school of analysis and how in the name of perceived 'national interest', South Asia is embroiled in a fearful hellfire that might lead unimaginable consequences.

**Keywords:-** India, Pakistan, China, Nuclear, South Asia.

## I. INTRODUCTION

President Clinton once stated that "South Asia is the most dangerous place on Earth" (Perry, 2002 cited in Ganguly, 2008, p. 46). The optics around South Asian security architecture isn't built over the narrative of least care for human life and raging lawlessness depicting the Hobbesian state of nature. There are some facets which resonate such insecure surroundings but same can be said for other regions because no country or region can boast of being perfectly secure. If we contextualise President Clinton's words, for some, his inference might hold true as it was derived in the backdrop of impending nuclear fallout between two nuclear armed nation, India and Pakistan. One of the greatest scientific feats of mankind and an embodiment of human excellence, in the form of a weapon to bring about annihilation of millions in a flash of few seconds, nuclear bomb was a creation of quest to halt a bloodied Second World War and was exercised by the US over Japan. The world witnessed its catastrophic results and Japan ultimately surrendered fearing innumerable loss of lives. As oxymoronic as it sounds but these bombs do add to the spectacle of human brilliance and simultaneously brings a substantive

threat to human existence. When the spectre such weapons of potential mass destruction is hovering in a region marred with instability and long lasting conflict, it does bear a degree of great concern. This might be the precise reasons for President Clinton's cynical description of the region. But does the presence or absence of a nuclear weapon from a country or a region is the hallmark of security? Or is security of a region contingent solely on nuclear weapons? Of course the question doesn't bode well for a region which doesn't possess any nuclear weapon like that of Latin America. But for South Asia which have the two nuclear armed nations that have gone for direct war and a major rising power, also happens to be a nuclear weapon state which is in constant attempt to expand its sphere of influence over the region, the nuclear question does weigh heavily in the security architecture of the region.

There have been incendiary debates over the feasibility and utility of nuclear weapons. The camps have been divided into 'pro-proliferators' and 'non-proliferators.' The proponents of pro-proliferation line of thought stem from the fact that nuclear weapons bring in "long peace" and States should go for active proliferation to reach the end goal of lasting peace and inter state conflict negation. Kenneth Waltz has been a leading advocate of the pro-proliferation camp who has been supported by other neorealist scholars like John Mearsheimer (Sagan, 1994). On the contrary, scholars like Scott D. Sagan have actively voiced against the idea of proliferation and advanced the idea of nuclear disarmament on the grounds that this mad race for augmenting nuclear arsenal would bring in instability and become the cause of war which would be overtly nuclear in nature. It can also lead to accidental usage and proclivities of non state actors furthering their agenda in weak states (Sagan, 1994). The burning theoretical debate has been put to actionable rigour in the Indo-Pak conflicts and general security mix of the region. Both the states are nuclear armed and act as deterrent in their own narrative. Whether the deterrence has actually worked or it has led to further complication where the cost of such action would be millions of human lives is being analysed in the following sections through a country specific historical overview.

## II. PAKISTAN'S CONCERNS

The colonial history and the scourge of partition has refused to heal the wounds of Pakistan as a nation. It has greatly driven the political narrative of the nation and has been instrumental in painting the picture of India as a suspicious and vicious neighbour who is an existential threat to it. Pakistan has unfinished business with India in terms of

territorial bifurcation which has majorly led to conflict and the perception of long drawn enmity. For Pakistan, India is an existential threat and that too a nuclear armed India needed to be dealt resolutely. The battles of 1947-48 and 1965 didn't bring in much of drastic shift Pakistan's security mix but the defacing defeat in the 1971 war with India did bring a monumental shift in its strategic calculus. It compelled Pakistan to find credible answers to India's conventional military superiority (Menon, 2016). Pakistan was desperate to look for answers and it became steadfast in its pursuits after "Operation Smiling Buddha" by India in 1974 when India carried out its own 'peaceful nuclear' explosion. The quest ended at initiating a secretive nuclear programme with the China's help which had already established "iron clad friendship" and collusion of dark networks under the aegis of A.Q.Khan network (Narang, 2009/2010). The bitterness between the two neighbours is the stimulus for Pakistan's security complex and the imbedded response. Pakistan is aware of the asymmetrical conventional military balance vis-a-vis India and looks to address this through nuclear deterrence. It was visible on the backdrop of 'Operation Brasstacks' in 1987 where Pakistan came up with a subverted nuclear threat to India in order to wind up its military adventure on the border (Ganguly, 2008). Although Pakistan hadn't overtly declared that it was in possession of the bomb but this incident was indication enough to assess that it was on course to acquire one. Vipin Narang explains this scenario in terms of 'posturing' and dragging a third party in order to assuage the dangers of an armed conflict. In this case it was equivalent to giving specific signals to US to intervene and reign in India through exercise of its "catalytic posture" (Narang, 2009/10). With the Indian Pokhran 2 explosions of 1998, Pakistan also left the shroud of a 'maybe' nuclear state to an all out declared nuclear weapon state with its own explosions in the month of May. It was necessary for the Pakistani establishment hedged in a military-bureaucratic complex (Alavi, 1972) to redress the already tilted military balance with a nuclear calculus. The conflicts post the year 1998 took place under the dreaded shadow of nuclear weapons and thus were a focus of global attention. The Kargil conflict of 1999 and the Parliament attack in India in 2001 were the two incidents which brought the two nations on the brink of a nuclear war. Although the Kargil conflict was a limited war and was contained in one particular geography, Pakistan lauded its nuclear capability which deterred India from opening other fronts and causing an all out conflict. Same was the case during the huge military mobilisation under the banner of 'Operation Parakram' in response to the attack on Indian parliament. Third party interventions were also pivotal in finding the diplomatic solutions between the bitter nuclear armed enemies (Ganguly, 2008). Pakistan sees its nuclear capability not just as deterrence but also apolitical tool in the hands of the establishment. In a way it fulfils its security constraints and also gives it a strategic advantage.

The usage of the bomb to fulfil its political objective is based on the doctrine that Pakistan sees it as a significant tool for survivability and maintain status quo with India. Although Pakistan hasn't come out with an official stated nuclear doctrine but has time and again stated that it will use

it against conventional military attack by India which crosses certain redlines<sup>1</sup> and would carry out first strikes if it faces strategic threats. This 'posture' of responding to a conventional threat with a nuclear weapon is termed as "asymmetric escalation posture" by Vipin Narang who goes on to stress the subsequent need to build as many more bombs and the perils of continuous nuclear danger (Narang, 2009/2010). In its narrative, Pakistan has put India in a spot where India cannot cross the redline and carry out a conventional strike fearing a nuclear retaliation whereas Pakistan can keep nudging India through its nefarious means in Kashmir and elsewhere (Ganguly, 2008). This strategy had been put to question when India carried out the surgical strikes across the border in response to the Uri incident of 2016 and the Balakot Air strikes of 2019 where India put Pakistan's nuclear threats to a great stress test. The dominant discourse in Pakistan's official military and political communication is to put out the fair warning of a nuclear danger in such scenarios. With the capture of an Indian pilot and the zealous mood on both sides of the border, the nuclear danger indeed was on the burn, needed to be extinguished by rational minds or foreign interventions.

<sup>1</sup> the proposed redlines are beyond the scope of this paper. For further information, refer to Vipin Narang: *Posturing for Peace? Pakistan's Nuclear Postures and South Asian Stability*, The MIT Press, 2009/2010. Also refer to S. Paul Kapur: *Ten Years of Instability in a Nuclear South Asia*, The MIT Press, 2008.

### III. INDIA'S CONFUSION

Scott D. Sagan contentiously puts forward - "focusing on national security considerations as the cause of proliferation, is dangerously inadequate because nuclear weapons programmes also serve other more parochial and less obvious objectives" (Sagan, 1996-1997, p. 55) and builds a case for Indian proliferation being embedded in domestic political wrangling whether to build the bomb or not rather than typically hinged on the national security perspective solely. The Indian dilemma arose out of the Chinese proliferation and the loss in the 1962 war which was a serious case of national security consideration (Ganguly, 2008). The Indian side carried on with 'Operation Smiling Buddha' in 1974 and detonated its first device in the Pokhran. The other factor which could be put into consideration is the Indian weariness with tilting towards one super power block and seeking a nuclear umbrella and moreover the advanced stage of the nuclear program, urged its scientists to get the desired self reliant result by roping in the political class for requisite will (Sagan, 1996-1997). But the 1998 Pokhran 2 detonations propelled India to nuclear stage with an official status and widespread international condemnation. The exigency of the nuclear program was a two pronged response which India had been carefully dissecting for a while post the 1974 detonation. Firstly, India was privy to Pakistan's clandestine networks and Chinese help in pursuit of the bomb which created uneven security balance in the face of nuclear armament of its adversary. Secondly, the ruling BJP dispensation was riding on its hard

bound nationalist agenda decided to cross the threshold in lieu of the political considerations (Bajpai, 2009). India's nuclear posture as also stated in its doctrine reflects a 'No First Use policy' and an "assured retaliation posture" (Narang, 2009/2010) which typifies a "minimum credible deterrence" and also in a way saves it from an expensive arms race vis-a-vis its neighbour where its weapons are primarily for deterrent purposes and survivability in the advent of a nuclear war is the corner stone of nuclear objective (Narang, 2009/2010 ; Kapur, 2008). The threat analysis although had Chinese fervour in its scope for initiating the nuclear program, has increasingly been overshadowed by the Pakistani contestation of the nuclear question. The security balance of South Asia is heavily dependent on the nuclear posturing of these two countries who also have a troubled history and a tumultuous present and the threshold of tolerance is put to test on a regular basis due Kashmir and the contending factors.

India's response has mostly been measured in the light of Pakistani nuclear threats and warning. The political leadership did not play in the hands of domestic sentiments and maintained the nuclear threshold in the case of Kargil, negating Pakistan's numerous threat of lowering its nuclear threshold and launching a strike fearing a conventional Indian military attack dismembering the country (Ganguly, 2008). In the light of increased interference in Kashmir after its nuclear test and repeated assertion of using all weapons at its disposal, Pakistan's nuclear threat hasn't been able to deter India in terms of its conventional capabilities and response to such provocations. When questioned on the stand of Indian troops crossing the border in light Pakistan's nuclear retaliation during Kargil conflict, National Security Advisor Brajesh Mishra responded, "the army never pushed the government to cross the LoC. If the army had wanted, the government would have considered crossing the border and because Pakistan would have been unlikely to use nuclear weapon in that scenario. Pakistan can be finished by a few bombs and anyone with a small degree of sanity would know that nuclear war would have disastrous consequences for Pakistan" (cited in Kapur, 2008). The praxis of deterrence is played out only when the counter party acknowledges the threat made by the other and is of the view that the threat is credible (Freedman and Raghavan, 2018) and it has even more complicated the nuclear space in South Asia. It was evident in India's response of crossing the borders in 2016 and 2019 and its defence minister also hinting at further modification of 'no first use policy' in light of evolving threat perception from the bordering nation<sup>2</sup>.

#### IV. THE CHINESE FACTOR

China's nuclear dilemma has historically been shaped by the challenge put across by the US and maintaining a stand of itself in the socialist block during the cold war. It detonated its first device on 16th October, 1964 and the intent was provided by the US "hegemonic and power politics which would be responsible for creating most of the nuclear storm" (Haynes, 2016, p. 50). China also held the ambition of creating a super power status after the demise of Stalin and a powerful representative of the communist block as a

challenge to the USSR. In doing so, China had to follow the norms of a great power status and develop its nuclear capabilities (Halperin, 1965 ; Miller, 2021). Although Chinese nuclear weapons aren't directly involved in the security mix of South Asia but their other strategies does bode a mark in the region which can necessarily disturb the security architecture of the region. China doesn't portray a nuclear danger in the conventional sense or in rhetoric to India despite its border disputes. Even in the face of Galwan crisis which ended up in loss of lives and skirmish at the LAC, the nuclear warnings were at bay and not part of the political narrative. China does present a systemic nuclear imbalance by playing its card through Pakistan and has historically helped Pakistan to advance its nuclear acquisition and capabilities which present a direct threat to India and the region as a whole. The Chinese military modernisation and advancements of its delivery vehicles, although with US deterrence posture in the mainstream, does present a threat to India on lieu of a future uncertain scenario in the long run or just for the sheer conventional military imbalance it has created for India to manage (Menon, 2016). The nuclear question pertaining to China cannot be overlooked and moreover its presence in South Asia, specifically with regard to the region's conventional security.

<sup>2</sup> As per the news published in India Today. Available at: <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/india-no-first-use-nuclear-policy-may-change-rajnath-singh-1581403-2019-08-16>.

#### V. THE SHARED NUCLEAR SPACE

South Asian region has close to 321 nuclear warheads at present according to a report by Stockholm International Peace Research Institute. And if we take the nuclear warheads of China into the picture, the tally shoots to a staggering 671 WMD (Weapon of Mass Destruction).<sup>3</sup> This indeed makes South Asia a physical embodiment of President Clinton's assessment, "a dangerous place!" The ever evolving technical know-how and military advancements bring a graver danger to the shared space of South Asia as a whole and not just India and Pakistan. The yield of nuclear bombs are far more greater than the ones dropped on Nagasaki by the US and the delivery system has also advanced making it easier for its actual usage. In the light of all this danger, the effects of a radioactive fallout won't be to a fixed territory where the bomb would be dropped, instead it'll have unimaginable consequences for the region. It is unfair for smaller non nuclear states to be dragged into the nuclear standoff of major warring powers and the nuclear security architecture of South Asia affects more number of states in contrast to the numbers in possession of the bomb. The power dynamics has various other facets attached to the overall security of the region. The primary one being the 'command and control centre' and the highest decision making body of the nuclear regime. Scott Sagan's apprehension of "organisational military" command centres and level of decision making is one of the reason he is a naysayer for nuclear weapons as a harbinger of peace (Sagan, 1994). This is true in light of Pakistan where the military is in

control of the bomb and the exercise of tactical offensive needs a decentralised command, its officers who might sometime act with a myopic sense of personal motivation or an error judgement can have a mammoth repercussions (Narang, 2009/2010). Another recent mishap that took place where an Indian missile was accidentally fired into the neighbouring territory due to a ‘technical malfunction’ could have serious consequences for want escalation. This augurs well in light of accidental misfiring of nukes or falling in the hands of unwanted social elements and has been raised aptly by scholars like Scott Sagan and Sumit Ganguly (Sagan, 1994 ; Ganguly, 2008).

<sup>3</sup> As per the news report published in the Times of India on 15th June, 2021. Available at: <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/india-behind-china-pakistan-in-nuclear-warheads-but-not-worried/articleshow/83524404.cms>

The other being development of conventional delivery capabilities to augment nuclear strength and deterrence. China has taken lead in this front. Its primary focus in the US but if it shares the technology with Pakistan owing to its love for its “iron clad brother”, it might change the security environment. The “multiple independently targeted reentry vehicle” (MIRV) technology to its missiles in order to breach US Ballistic missile defence affects the security architecture of South Asia as well (Menon, 2016, p. 169). The potent platforms to deliver nuclear weapons is as much critical as having the bomb. India’s nuclear triad emphasises its doctrine of “minimum credible deterrence” and suits well for its second strike options. Pakistan presently lacks that potency but is actively working to overcome it. The point that drags behind in this scenario that these platforms also have a conventional military uses and its race for acquisition in the region doesn’t suit well for the purpose of long lasting peace as overcoming technical gap to develop the most lethal platform unwillingly flags an arms race in which other states also might actively participate in their own limited capacity. Philippines’ and Vietnam’s interest in buying Brahmos system from India is a casein point.

## VI. IS THE NUCLEAR DILEMMA OVER EMPHASISED?

South Asia is home to some 1.9 billion people. Threat of a nuclear holocaust does bear a significant danger on the region due to tensions between two nuclear weapon states. But does the nuclear security which is intrinsically attached to human security is the sole object of focus for a region? Does human security only entails security of life and being safe from flying nukes overhead or a military overrun? The idea of human security as propounded by Kanti Bajpai doesn’t have such linear understanding, it deals with various other factors which make one’s life worth living and not mere survival (Bajpai, 2003). The neorealist notion of security in an anarchical world increasingly intertwined with proclivities of military conflicts plays in the hands of nuclear discourse. The critical insight might focus on different dimensions of security vis-a-vis environment, water and health security and they equally have a detrimental effect

on the populace of South Asia in their day to day life (Krause and William, 1996). The incidence of poverty is pretty high in South Asia. It is also home to some significant number of hunger related issues including malnutrition. Food security is a major challenge which has been exacerbated by the pandemic and climate change has significantly altered the occurrence of natural calamity bringing immediate threat to lives and livelihoods of millions. These questions concern many small states in the region who have a direct stake in resolving it. Unlike the nuclear string which is plucked essentially by India and Pakistan, to a certain extent China too, leaves the voices of other associated nations unheard. Stepping out of the nuclear shadow can bestow fruitful results in terms of lowering the immediate danger of destruction and also solving the essence of overall development in the region and ringing in a better standard of living in the region. The epistemological tilt towards the realist understanding of security and neglect of local perspective have also played a role in fanning the narrative about nuclear danger. No doubt the security space is occupied by conventional hard military power to a large extent but that doesn’t mean that other aspects of security can be left to vagaries war mongering leaders and institutions which exercise political control.

## VII. CONCLUSION

No doubt that nuclear weapons pose consequential threat to existence and to play with it is like embracing hellfire. Their presence in a region which is constantly on the brink of boil and conflict is way too dangerous. The penultimate question whether it is a harbinger of peace or a possible cause of annihilation cannot be actually ascertained tangibly and rests only on theoretical papers with supporting case studies to put forward their points. The farther the disarmament question is from reaching a desired conclusion, the more closer we are to being embroiled in the perils of the nuclear age. India and Pakistan have significant number of issues to resolve and the nuclear question is just one aspect of it, although probably for some scholars, the preeminent one. According to Vipin Narang, the “nuclear weapons are here to stay” and the actions are “irreversible” (Narang, 2009/2010) but these weapons cannot be led to take commanding position in deciding the course of international relations in South Asia. The alternative to the Indo-Pakistan flux of security issue which has a spillover effect in the region can be a mechanism or platform to discuss in impending issue including the uncomfortable nuclear question. The arms limitation treaties in line with SALT between US and Russia can be given a chance amongst various other institutional mechanism that could be chalked out. Differences become disputes when left unattended and this has been the case with respect to South Asian nuclear security architecture. The communication gap and posturing has led to deterrence failure, bringing to question the utility of nukes itself. Such is the dearth of effective dialogue and communication which gives space to hullabaloo about nuclear destruction and military conflicts. If the weapons are her to stay, the narrative around it has been created a little amiss. The realities have to be acknowledged and actions should be based on effective human upliftment in the region in a conducive security architecture.

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