

China-India-Pakistan Nuclear Triangle: Reassessing South Asian Strategic Stability



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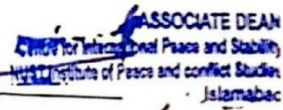
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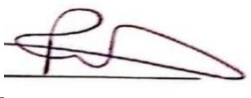
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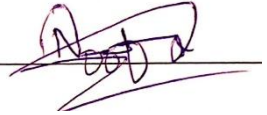
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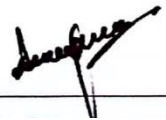
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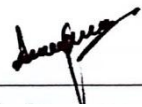
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LIST OF ACRONYMS

LSA	Logistic Support Agreement
COMCASA	Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement
GSOMIA	General Security of Military Information Agreement
BECA	Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement for Geospatial Intelligence
QUAD	Quadrilateral Security Dialogue
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
CPEC	China Pakistan Economic Corridor
SLBM	Submarine Launched Ballistic Missile
BMD	Ballistic Missile Defence
MIRV	Multiple Independently-Targetable Reentry Vehicle
SAC	Strategic Air Command
START	Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty
ABM	Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty
SALT	Strategic Arms Limitations Talks/Treaty
MAD	Mutually Assured Destruction
ASAT	Anti-satellite Weapon
SDI	Strategic Defense Initiative
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
ICBM	Intercontinental Ballistic Missile
FRG	Federal Republic of Germany
CTBT	Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty
PRC	People's Republic of China
SEATO	Southeast Asia Treaty Organization

OBOR	One Belt One Road Initiative
NPT	Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons
LAC	Line of Actual Control
SAARC	South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation
LOC	Line of Control
WTO	World Trade Organization
UNSC	United Nations Security Council
MTCR	Missile Technology Control Regime
LEMOA	Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement
ISA	Industrial Security Agreement
SLOC	Sea Lines of Communication
CBM	Confidence Building Measure
CSD	Cold Start Doctrine
NFU	No First Use
SLCM	Submarine Launched Cruise Missile
AIP	Air-Independent Propulsion
NCA	National Command Authority
IIOJK	Indian Illegally Occupied Jammu and Kashmir
NSP	National Security Policy
G20	Group of Twenty

ABSTRACT

The intertwined and overlapping relationships between India, Pakistan, and China have evolved into a nuclear triangle. The three states have a regional and global presence of their own, while they also share borders with each other. The fact that the three of them are nuclear-capable is concerning. The triangle, unfortunately, is not straightforward. It comprises complex and unstable relationships that have created, in the said triangle, the potential to threaten the strategic stability in South Asia. China and Pakistan have had a decades-long all-weather friendship. Relations between China and India have oscillated between cooperation and competition. India and Pakistan, however, have been arch-enemies since their emergence on the global map. Moreover, the India/Pakistan duad and the India/China duad consist of the menacing element of the territorial disputes, which have kept them from resolving their political and military issues absolutely and indefinitely. The US has played a crucial role in intensifying the challenges created by the triangle. In its pursuit to contain China in the region, the US is facilitating India's military, cyber, and naval advancement. Growing Indian might have intensified security dilemmas and threat perceptions in the region. It has especially placed Pakistan in a vulnerable position and heightened its security concerns. The trajectory of the triangle in recent history has demonstrated that it might be negatively impacting the strategic stability in South Asia and might disastrously destabilize the region in the future. Therefore, studying, analyzing, and contemplating this triangle and its tangible and potential impact on the strategic stability in South Asia is the need of the day and the hour. Only, when it is fully grasped how dangerous a complex nuclear triangle can be for the region, can the policy-makers make informed decisions capable of mitigating the situation. It is qualitative research which comprises of detailed exploration and analysis of the literature on the topic using secondary sources both from the internet and in print. Moreover, in-depth interviews of the experts on the topic were conducted, which provided primary data and allowed the findings to be further practical - taking inspiration from the real-world experiences of the key personalities directly engaged in the politics of South Asia. It is exploratory research focused on deeply exploring the generality and uniqueness of the triangle and how it did, can, and will impact the strategic stability in South Asia.

Key Words: South Asia, Nuclear Deterrence, Strategic Stability, China-Pakistan-India

Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

Introduction

India, Pakistan and China are three of the few nuclear-armed nations in the world. They have contiguous borders and have a set of overlapping relationships consisting of friendship, competition and enmity. India and Pakistan are arch enemies who have engaged in four wars and experienced multiple crises. The major point of contention between them is the State of Jammu and Kashmir. India and China also have contended over the territorial rights over the region of Ladakh and Tibet. On the other hand, Pakistan and China have enjoyed an indefinite period of close cooperation in multiple arenas – a fact that has irked India. These intertwining relationships have created a strategic triangle, where one cannot maintain bilateral relations with the other without affecting the third. US has played a negative role in this scenario by facilitating Indian military advancement and influence in the region, creating a simultaneous threat for Pakistan and China. Therefore, US actions have pushed Pakistan and China closer, creating a sense of insecurity for the Indians in the region. The scenario has also increased Indian military and psychological dependence on the US. The most pressing concern in this situation is that the recent political and military developments in the region have created complex relationships and hostile approaches that are threatening the strategic stability in South Asia. The aim of the research is to analyze and bring to light the fact that to what extent the said nuclear triangle is threatening the strategic stability in South Asia. The research aims to succeed at determining the military, political, and most specifically nuclear risks for South Asia in the context of the complex China-Pakistan-India nuclear triangle.

1.1 Background

Strategic stability in South Asia is under a serious threat. Recent events have facilitated multiple geopolitical shifts that have created considerable security threats for the region. South Asia is already a region burdened with two nuclear dyadic relationships – India and Pakistan

and India and China.¹ India and China emerged in their modern incarnation not much far apart from each other – India in 1947 and China in 1949. Since then, considering their size, their glorious history and civilizational roots, both have aspired for great power status in the region. Efforts to keep the relations between the two peaceful didn't last long. Mao's invasion of Tibet brought the two countries in direct confrontation with each other, in 1962. Since then, India, aware of its weaker status compared to China, has irked China through seeking closer relations with great powers like the USA, and erstwhile USSR.² Indian wooing of other powerful nations has remained a serious factor that has further tainted Sino-Indian relations. Chinese nuclear tests in the 1964 were the last straw that pushed India into a decade long struggle to achieve its own nuclear capability – a struggle that saw the light of the day in 1974. Since then, India and China have stayed in a state of nuclear competition, constantly assessing activities on the other side in order to calculate their own position in this menacingly dyadic relationship.³

On the other hand, one look at the Indo-Pakistani nuclear dyad, the Sino-Indian dyad appears relatively stable. Sino-Indian rivalry is more about power politics than actual war making, unless there are events creating heightened tensions. Same cannot be said about the Indo-Pakistan dyad. They are consistently embroiled in an action-reaction syndrome. Each measure on one side is taken extremely personally by the other. There is an emotional factor in this relationship which is missing from the Sino-Indian equation. It is like a family feud where the haphazard break-up of the subcontinent is still fresh in the minds of both sides.⁴

Moreover, elites on the Pakistani side worry that Indians have still not full-heartedly accepted the partition of the subcontinent and yearn for its union as a single powerful nation, exerting influence all over the world. Moreover, during the partition, the Muslim-majority state of Jammu and Kashmir, that acceded to India, has permanently damaged the relations between the two neighbors. Kashmir is a point of contention that has perpetuated for more than half a century and has kept both India and Pakistan in a de facto war. The relations were further and irretrievably destroyed when Pakistan had to lose its eastern wing in 1971, due to the Indian plotting and deliberate assistance to the Bengalis. Both states have engaged in wars four times

¹ Brahma Chellaney, "The China-India-Pakistan Triangle: Scenarios for the 21st Century," *CERI Strategy Papers, Center for Policy Research (India)*, no. 8, (2010): 5-15.

² Chellaney, *The China-India-Pakistan Triangle*, 5-15

³ Ashley J. Tellis, "Striking Asymmetries: Nuclear Transitions in Southern Asia," (Washington, *Cernegie Endowment for International Peace*, (2022): 30-53.

⁴ Tellis, *Striking Asymmetries*, 30-53

since the partition – in 1948, 1965, 1971 and 1999. Apart from these wars, there have been multiple crisis that have brought the armed forces on both sides face to face with each other.⁵

The two nuclear dyadic relationships between neighboring states in the South Asian region has converted the scenario into a single trilateral relationship. Any element of the Sino-Indian dyad has an impact on the Indo-Pakistan dyad and vice-versa. A serious turn of events that has shaken the South Asian trilemma is the US-China global competition in the 21st century. Scholars are observing a shift from unipolarity to multipolarity, where a rising China is emerging as a grave threat for the US global dominance.⁶

In order to balance against China, US is consistently strengthening its relations with India and insulating it to act as a major actor in the region. India and US have multiple foundational defence agreements in place: General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA); Logistic Support Agreement (LSA); Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA) and the Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement for Geospatial Intelligence (BECA).⁷ The evolving US and Indian strategic partnership has naturally pushed China closer to Pakistan. There is little doubt that China played a considerable role in Pakistan's nuclearization, in order to keep India occupied with its western frontiers. Moreover, growing US and Indian romance is creating strategic anxiety in Pakistan, which, naturally, being conventionally inferior to India, is relying more and more on its nuclear deterrent.⁸

These evolving relationships have created a broader strategic chain, which not only involves India, Pakistan and China, but also the US. India is getting closer to US, which is also visible by its growing prominence in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD). On the other hand, China and Pakistan have not only enhanced their strategic relations but also tightened their economic ties, especially in the context of China's Belt and Road Initiative's (BRI) flagship project of China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). In the midst of this background, the Pulwama crisis of 2019 and the China-India Ladakh crisis in 2020 sent shockwaves in the international community. It heightened tensions of military involved crisis between nuclear-armed rivals. Moreover, on 9th March, 2022, India accidentally fired a BrahMos missile

⁵ Tellis, *Striking Asymmetries*, 30-53

⁶ Gulshan Bibi, Dr. Mubeen Adnan, Muhammad Asif, "Strategic Stability on the Anvil: India-Pakistan-China Triangle," *Palarch'S Journal of Archaeology Of Egypt* 18, no.10, (2021): 930-941.

⁷ "Enhancing Strategic Stability in Southern Asia (Washington: United States Institute of Peace, 2021)

⁸ Salman Bashir, "The China-India-Pakistan Nuclear Triangle: Consequential Choices for Asian Security," *Journal for Peace and Nuclear Disarmament* 5, no.2, (2022): 336-349.

originating from Sirsa, Haryana, that crashed into Mian Channu, Khanewal District of Punjab, Pakistan. It was the first time a nuclear armed nation made an accidental launch onto the territory of its rival. Pakistan's restraint in the situation was appreciated, but it did raise concerns of what future could look like if similar events continued to be repeated.⁹

In the midst of this delicate situation, it is important to note that the Indians claim to be the victim of cross-border terrorism emanating from Pakistan. In this context, it is important to take note of two doctrines. The first is the Joint Doctrine of the Indian Armed Forces in 2017 and then the second, the Land Warfare Doctrine of 2018. Both doctrines incorporate the prospect of reprisals against Pakistan in the form of surgical strikes, as a retaliatory measure against alleged terrorist activities originating from Pakistan. Again, considering it is a nuclear dyadic relationship, the perils of such doctrines and their prospective implementation cannot be taken lightly¹⁰

South Asia is a volatile region, but it is also a region of great significance on the global scene. Since Cold War, US has attempted to act as a mediator to diffuse tensions between India and Pakistan, but the successes in this venture have not been exemplary. The nuclear triangle in the region has created massive uncertainties for the leaders around the globe. South Asia is an engine of global economic growth and also houses massive portion of the world's population. Any nuclear confrontation in the region has the potential to destabilize global economy and society. The consistent nuclear competition has given the region great international prominence. Global US and China competition has made implementation of positive initiatives in the region much more difficult. While the China and Pakistan have got consistently closer, US and Pakistan's relationship has been tainted due to growing ties between US and India, and US frustration with Pakistan's alleged sponsorship of terrorism. There are vested interests of major powers in the region's stability. They keenly observe every political or military development in the region. Thus, South Asian strategic stability is directly tied to global peace, security, and stability.¹¹

Though US has demonstrated a tilt towards India, since the Clinton Administration, the Trump Administration formally announced its Indo-Pacific strategy, declaring a much more prominent

⁹ Sitara Noor, "Strategic Stability in South Asia: The Evolving Challenges and Potential Opportunities for India and Pakistan," *Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad*, (2022): 23-35.

¹⁰ Noor, Strategic Stability in South Asia, 23-35.

¹¹ Bibi, Strategic Stability on the Anvil, 930-941.

role for India in its competition with China; a policy that was reaffirmed by the Biden Administration. There was a measure of hope in Indo-Pakistan relations, as they engaged in bilateral negotiations, from the 2003 to 2007. However, 2008 Mumbai attacks led to complete estrangement, and the 2019 Pulwama/Balakot series served as the final nail in the coffin. Furthermore, Modi's, August, 2019, abrogation of Article 370 altered Indian administered Kashmir's constitutional status. It has irreversibly destabilized the Indo-Pakistan relations. Even to this day, there are unbending grievances in the Pakistani populace.¹²

The chances of bringing peace and security to the region appear bleak. During the Cold War, the nuclear rivals were separated by thousands of miles creating some semblance of crisis stability. South Asia is a region plagued with two nuclear armed dyads, which together have created a nuclear triangle. This nuclear triangle is a complex case of entangled relationships creating constant chain reactions as a result of each event and development. Further destabilizing this trilemma is the black cloud in the form of US, which is constantly disturbing the tenuous relationships in the region. The region is extremely volatile. It is an unsettling example of a nuclear triangle in the age of nuclear weapons.¹³

The purpose of this study is to analyze, understand and demonstrate how this complex triangular relationship can and might affect the strategic stability in South Asia. The state of strategic stability in South Asia in this research will be assessed through laying down the conceptual foundation through exploring the concept of strategic stability and the theory of nuclear deterrence, connecting it to the historical Cold War triangle of USA-USSR-France, which would eventually allow the researcher to set the stage against which the dynamics of Pak-China-India nuclear triangle can be analyzed and the strategic stability in the South Asia can be reexamined and reassessed in the light of the research.

1.2 Problem Statement

The problem to be addressed through this study is that how the evolving India-China-Pakistan nuclear triangle is undermining the strategic stability in the region of South Asia. In the context of this issue, the triangle is the independent variable while the strategic stability in the South Asian region is the dependent variable.

¹² Enhancing Strategic Stability in, 5-15.

¹³ Noor, Strategic Stability in South Asia, 23-35.

1.3 Conceptual Framework

Strategic stability refers to a state of affairs where both nuclear rivals lack the incentive to go for a preemptive strike against one another. It ensures the security and survivability of nuclear weapons under all conditions. During the Cold War, there was massive strategic anxiety on the US side regarding a potential preemptive nuclear strike by the USSR, which US might not have survived and have lost the capability to retaliate punitively. Thus, lack of strategic stability makes a preemptive strike more appealing and also creates ‘use-it-or-lose-it’ pressures on the other side. Strategic stability refers to a state of balance, even where there is lack of parity, that one side might not be tempted to strike first due to the possibility of the consequences.¹⁴

For strategic stability to sustain, it is very important to have crisis stability. Crisis stability ensures that under the pressure of crisis, one party would not be tempted to strike first. The constant possibility of a surprise attack by USSR on the US side led to the creation of the concept of strategic stability. Strategic stability is achieved when both sides in a rivalry achieve the credible second-strike capability. It removes the incentive to strike first in the virtue of ‘Mutually Assured Destruction’. There were bilateral discussions on transparency of strategic foundations and fissile material control that led to some semblance of strategic stability during the Cold War.¹⁵

In the 21st century, the concept of strategic stability has broadened to include myriad new challenges like emerging technologies such as Submarine Launched Ballistic Missiles (SLBMs), dual-use nuclear platforms, hypersonic missiles, tactical nuclear weapons, Ballistic Missile Defence (BMD) and Multiple Independently-targetable Reentry Vehicles (MIRVs).¹⁶

Now, in South Asia, there are myriad challenges due to the Pakistan-India-China nuclear triangle that are destabilizing the region and harming the strategic stability. The political environment is altering and making arms race, crisis instability, militarized conflict and eventually crossing of nuclear threshold more probable. These changes include shifting geopolitical relationships, conventional and nuclear arms build-ups and doctrinal and policy variations. As mentioned above, US-China competition, growing nuclear arsenals, emergence

¹⁴ Balraj Nagal, “India and Ballistic Missile Defense: Furthering a Defensive Deterrent,” *Carnegie Endowment For International Peace*, (2016): 9-25.

¹⁵ Nagal, India and Ballistic Missile Defense, 9-25.

¹⁶ “New Challenges to Strategic Stability in the China-India-Pakistan Nuclear Competition,” The Stimson Center, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, *Carnegie International Nuclear Policy Conference*, October 28, 2022.

of sophisticated technologies like dual use nuclear systems, sea-based weapons, BMDs and MIRVs are making the situation more and more sensitive. All these developments are harming the strategic stability in the region.¹⁷

As discussed above, situation in South Asia is much more complex, because, apart from the dyadic rivalries, there is a nuclear triangle that has woven all these relationships into an intractable web. China is in a global competition with the world's superpower and is, hence, enhancing its conventional and nuclear capabilities. While Chinese developments are aimed towards US, they are naturally creating uneasiness on the Indian side, due to their decades-old rivalry. In this situation, Indian insecurities have motivated India to achieve a second-strike-capability against China in order to ensure deterrence stability. Such a move by India is has naturally created strategic anxieties in Pakistan. Pakistan is conventionally inferior to India, and it solely relies on its nuclear capability to deter all sorts of Indian aggression against it. A credible second-strike-capability on the Indian side will naturally create a fear of a preemptive strike from the Indians, who would feel insulated from any Pakistani retaliatory measures. Pursuit of BMDs is further adding a complicating factor to this triangular mix, as the sense of security provided by a missile defense naturally motivates nuclear-armed nations to make preemptive strikes against their rivals.¹⁸

Both China and India adhere to a nuclear 'no-first-use' policy as it aligns with their political mindset. They perceive their nuclear capability only as an instrument of deterrence. As the 2020 Ladakh crisis has demonstrated, the conventional stability amongst the two states is still fragile, however, as of now, there is local and global confidence in the strategic stability and low prospects of nuclear use between the two states. When it comes to Indo-Pakistan dyad, the picture is much different. As mentioned above, Pakistan seeks to balance against Indian conventional superiority with its nuclear deterrent. For this purpose, it has refrained from embracing a 'no-first-use' policy and has demonstrated much more willingness to resort to the use of nuclear weapons.¹⁹

¹⁷ "New Challenges to Strategic Stability in the China-India-Pakistan Nuclear Competition," The Stimson Center, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, *Carnegie International Nuclear Policy Conference*, October 28, 2022.

¹⁸ Mansoor Ahmed, "Pakistan's Tactical Nuclear Weapons and Their Impact on Stability," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, (2016): 5-14.

¹⁹ Naeem Salik, *Learning to Live with the Bomb: Pakistan: 1998-2016*, (London, Oxford University Press, (2017):27-85.

Since the partition of the subcontinent, there have not only been wars between India and Pakistan, but multiple devastating crises. After the failure of India's protracted mobilization and deployment along the border in the 2001–2002 crisis and the loss of strategic surprise in both the 2001–2002 and the 2008 crises, India introduced the Cold Start, or proactive military operations, doctrine—which calls for up to eight independent armored brigades to penetrate up to 50 kilometers, about 31 miles, into the territory of Pakistan, without crossing Pakistan's nuclear thresholds.

As discussed, Pakistan cannot compete with India conventionally. As a response to the Cold Start Doctrine, Pakistan introduced tactical nuclear weapons to its nuclear arsenal, in order to deter India from making an incursion in to the Pakistani territory. If such a situation arises, it is still not certain whether such an incursion will cross the Indian nuclear threshold or not. There has already been discussion in the Indian strategic circles over nuclear doctrinal modification, considering that any use of nuclear weapons against Indians, whether it is on the Indian soil or not, can call for 'massive retaliation' from the Indian side.²⁰

It is important to note that until now, Chinese and Indian nuclear weapons have been countervalue in nature – weapons that are meant to deter by punishment through destruction of cities and massive civilian casualties. Pakistan's introduction of the Nasr missile has added the counterforce element - deterrence by denial - to the mix. It complicates the triangular relationship much further.²¹

Each development in the last decade has created further trilemmas. India faces a tough strategic dilemma, where its attempts to balance against China through developing a credible second-strike-stability, which creates strategic anxieties in Pakistan. Problematically, what is credible for China might not be minimum for Pakistan, and what is minimum for Pakistan might not be credible for China. When Pakistan looks to its east, it sees a much powerful India that spends seven times more on its military capability. When India looks to its north-east, it is perturbed by a rising China which is militarily and technologically much more superior to itself. And when China looks to its east, it sees an all-powerful Superpower deeply motivated to

²⁰ Ahmed, *Pakistan's Tactical Nuclear Weapons*, 5-14.

²¹ Bibi, *Strategic Stability on the Anvil*, 930-941.

undermine it in international politics. This strategic chain is becoming increasingly intractable, creating threats not only for regional, but also global security and stability.²²

In this strategic chain, India constantly feels concerned about the possibility of a two-front war with Pakistan and China. However, many scholars have argued that these concerns are exaggerated and unwarranted, as there is no past precedent for such concerns. Another growing challenge in this trilemma is that India and China are no more completely comfortable with their reliance on the 'massive retaliation' posture. Pakistan's development of tactical nuclear weapons has already inspired a novel thinking in the Indian strategic circles regarding formulating responses for every rung of the nuclear escalation ladder. China is also showing greater interest in developing capabilities and capacity to be able to respond to nuclear threats of each nature and scale. If China embarks on the pursuit to develop counterforce and other nuclear confrontation capabilities, it will surely inspire India to develop counterforce weapons of its own. As mentioned repeatedly, the South Asian nuclear triangle is becoming menacing with each passing day, and the strategic stability of the region has been thrown into massive doubts.²³

Even though inferior to India, Pakistan maintains one of the world's largest militaries with 650,000 active-duty military personnel and sophisticated intelligence and proxy capabilities. China has played a critical role in Pakistani nuclear and missile advancement. India on the other hand has twice as many submarines and fighter jets compared to Pakistan. It is estimated that, by 2030, India will achieve a flotilla of five to six nuclear-armed submarines, consolidating its second-strike-capability. Even India's nuclear and conventional capability dwindles when it is seen side by side with China. China's standing military forces are estimated to include more than 2 million active-duty personnel, 355 ships and submarines, and more than 2,200 combat aircraft. Its current arsenal of nuclear weapons exists primarily to deter the United States.²⁴

Since deterrence capabilities on all three sides have created a semblance of strategic stability, it has led to a 'stability-instability-paradox' in the region. The paradox refers to a situation where nuclear armed states have enough confidence in their deterrent capability to engage in

²² Rajesh Rajagopalan, "India's Nuclear Doctrine Debate," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, (2016): 7-19.

²³ Rajagopalan, *India's Nuclear Doctrine*, 7-19.

²⁴ Enhancing Strategic Stability in, 5-15.

low intensity conflicts with each other. Pulwama/Balakot crisis of 2019 between India and Pakistan and Ladakh crisis of 2020 between China and India are cases in point. These low intensity conflicts fought under the nuclear umbrella led to further instability. They enhanced the risk-taking tendencies of the nuclear rivals and created the possibilities of inadvertent escalation.²⁵

Considering all the factors above, the situation in South Asia is more vulnerable than it appears. The India-Pakistan-China nuclear triangle has evolved into multiple entangled relationships where the risk of inadvertent escalation and crossing of the nuclear threshold is ever present. The strategic chain does not end at these three South Asian nations. US acts as the most complicating agent in this intractable trilemma. The purpose of the study is to analyze the entangled relationships in order to make sense of the South Asian nuclear triangle and assess whether the strategic stability in the region is capable of holding against these developments in the region. Thus, the concept of strategic stability is the theoretical foundation of the research.

1.4 Research Methodology

The research is qualitative, utilizing both primary and secondary data. Prominent literature was thoroughly explored and interviews of leading scholars and practitioners in the domain were conducted. Moreover, it is exploratory research thoroughly exploring the historical events and current dynamics that have created, and sustained the triangle, and turned it into a challenge for the South Asian strategic stability. The qualitative research strategy was selected, because, in order to inspire an informed debate on the issue, theories and concepts have to be scrutinized. Moreover, many historical events and current dynamics have to be explored conceptually and comprehensively to understand the impact of the triangle on the strategic stability of South Asia. It is not a straight forward question that can be quantified through statistical data. It involves multiple overlapping relationships and interconnected issues. It is the current regional and international challenge that has to be analyzed, explored, examined and investigated with an open mind and willingness to deal with multiple perspectives. Alan Bryman, in his book, 'Social Research Methods' recommends that for exploratory research - dealing with a complex political dynamic - qualitative approach is the best strategy.

²⁵ Asim B. Khan, "The Price of Nonconventional Security," *Carnegie Endowment For International Peace*, (2016): 8-18.

1.5 Research Questions

1. What is the context of China-India-Pakistan nuclear triangle in the contemporary politics?
2. Why the China-Pakistan-India nuclear triangle is significant for the region?
3. What impact the China-Pakistan-India nuclear triangle is creating on the South Asian strategic stability?

1.6 Research Objectives

1. To analyze the impact of multiple alliances in the context of China-Pakistan-India nuclear triangle under the US influence.
2. To examine and analyze the main features of China-Pakistan-India nuclear triangle.
3. To deduce the impact of the China-Pakistan-India nuclear triangle on the South Asian strategic stability in contemporary politics.

1.7 Significance of Research

South Asia is a region of great strategic importance. It bridges the Indian Ocean to the Pacific in the East and the Mediterranean in the West. Furthermore, this region has emerged as a vital intersection of maritime trade, connecting the producers of natural resources countries with the consumers states. South Asia also holds a major portion of the world's population. It is an important region in the world, and has also transformed into an economic engine, boosting the world economy. This research holds special significance for the leaders, scholars and policy makers for grasping the emerging threats and challenges in the region. Since its emergence, Pakistan's survival has been under a threat due to Indian malicious designs. Indian elite never accepted the partition of the subcontinent and still aspires to incorporate Pakistan back into a Greater India. Moreover, relations between India and China have also remained strained, since their modern incarnations in the 1947 and 1949. This strategic dynamic has kept Pakistan at the tail end of this strategic chain, where events in US affect China, events in China affect India, and then events in India affect Pakistan. Pakistan has considerable security concerns as it is conventionally much inferior to India. It can only rely on its nuclear deterrent for its security and survival. The nuclear triangle is posing a tremendous threat to the strategic stability in South Asia. As discussed, the region holds significant global presence and influence and any challenge to its security and stability carries the potential to affect the global peace and security.

It is genuinely important for the scholars and the policy makers to make use of the research on the subject to grasp that to what extent the triangle is undermining the strategic stability in the region, and how these potentially drastic implications can be mitigated.

1.8 Literature Review

In an article by ‘USIP SENIOR STUDY GROUP’ FINAL REPORT: Enhancing Strategic Stability in Southern Asia’, the experts argued that though there is some semblance of strategic stability in South Asia, the routine border clashes between Indian and Pakistani Line of Control and Indian and Chinese Actual Line of Control carry potential for escalation. The geopolitical changes and newly emerging technologies are presenting new sets of challenges, that have made the region much more volatile. India constantly feels insecure regarding a potential two-front war in an event of crisis, from Pakistan and China. These insecurities are exacerbating the delicate nuclear triangle. Thus, international community should be cognizant of the situation and should consistently ponder upon measures to keep things in this significant region under control. The article is relevant to the study because it discusses the newly emerging technologies which pose novel sets of challenges for the strategic stability in the region.²⁶

Gulshan Bibi, Dr. Mubeen Adnan, and Muhammad Asif argue that the state of Jammu and Kashmir is a serious point of contention in the South Asian region. Moreover, India also claims part of the Aksai Chin - a region administered by China- and eastern portion of the larger J&K, which has been the subject of dispute between India and China, since the late 1950s. These enduring conflicts, which have not escalated to a full-blown war yet, are consistently destabilizing the region, by inducing border skirmishes, arms build-up, expansion of nuclear arsenals and rapid technological advancement in the military domain. Thus, the article addresses major concern the research is based on; the South Asian strategic stability in the context of the nuclear triangle.²⁷

Ashley J. Tellis claims that though India, Pakistan and China have repeatedly given lip service to the goal of total abolition of the nuclear weapons from the world, their actions could not be farther away from it. China is consistently modernizing its conventional and nuclear capabilities as it perceives an existential threat from the US. This global dynamic is having a serious impact on the South Asian region, where China’s neighboring rival is severely

²⁶ Enhancing Strategic Stability in, 5-15.

²⁷ Bibi, Strategic Stability on the Anvil, 928-943.

perturbed by China's arms build-up, and is, as a reaction, has embarked upon a journey to advance its own conventional and nuclear capabilities. Since Pakistan is conventionally inferior to India, Indian conventional and nuclear build-up is creating strategic anxiety in Pakistan. It is constantly flexing its muscles to keep itself in a position that is safe and secure and shielded from any threats from India. The article is deeply pertinent to the research as it discusses how China and US global competition is proving to be highly destabilizing for the South Asian Region.²⁸

Salman Bashir initiated the debate that Asia-Pacific is the new center of global politics. The strengthening relations between US and India have been unnerving for China. Moreover, addition of maritime dimensions has further led to novel challenges for the strategic stability in the region. Though, there are low chances of a nuclear war between India and China, the situation between Pakistan and India is much more precarious. The whole dynamic involving this strategic chain has pushed Pakistan to develop its nuclear posture into a full-spectrum deterrence. Salam Bashir's take on the triangle is germane to the debate as he addresses the fact that the strategic chain in the region is directly impacting its strategic stability.²⁹

Toby Dalton has made multiple claims. He argues that Cold War confidence in strategic stability is not applicable in the South Asian region. While Cold War consisted of a dyadic relationship in a bipolar world, South Asia consists of a nuclear triangle. He argues that mostly the literature has focused on dyadic relationships in South Asia, but in order to understand the full complexity of the regional relationships and the challenges that they create, there should be a full scholarly evaluation of the nuclear triangle. He claims that China, as the dominant nation in the region, sits at the apex of this triangle where Sino-Indian leg is competitive and Sino-Pakistani leg is cooperative. Developments in one leg affects the other leg, leading to entangled relationships that create massive anxieties and uncertainties in the region. The article carries considerable potential for constructing the debate on how a triangular nuclear relationship can be massively different and more dangerous than a dyadic one.³⁰

Sitara Noor has highlighted that strategic stability in South Asia is under a constant threat, especially due to the Indo-Pakistan dyad. The global competition between US and China is affecting the region's peace and security, affecting the relations between India and China.

²⁸ Tellis, *Striking Asymmetries*, 30-53.

²⁹ Bashir, *The China-India-Pakistan*, 336-349.

³⁰ Toby Dalton, "Strategic Triangle," *Carnegie Endowment For International Peace*, (2013).

However, the dyad that is most gravely under the threat because of this global dynamic is Indo-Pakistani relationship, which is reaching almost at all low points. The issue of Kashmir and alleged terrorism originating from the Pakistani side has kept both the countries at loggerheads with each other. The dire situation is resulting in arms build-up, expansion of nuclear arsenals, media misinformation, and intermittent crisis that have seriously thrown the strategic stability in South Asia under serious crisis. Sitara Noor's view point is useful for the discussion, as she has fairly emphasized upon the fact that how menacing Indo-Pak dyad can prove for the strategic stability in South Asia.³¹

Brahma Chellaney has reasoned that the South Asian region is plagued with nuclear proliferation which shows no sign of halting. Despite constant US efforts, China has not hesitated from its nuclear cooperation with Pakistan. This dynamic is creating anxieties in India, which is motivated to consistently expand its own nuclear arsenal. US and Russia have tacitly recognized India as a nuclear weapon state which has further irked Pakistan, who faces a constant threat from India. US and other leading countries have realized that nuclear weapons in the South Asian region are to stay and the only way forward is to ensure that the strategic stability in the region is strengthened, through keeping the weapons of mass destruction limited to the use of deterrence only.³²

In another article, Brahma Chellaney argues that in South Asia, China, Pakistan and India are tied in a complex strategic triangle that pits China and Pakistan against India. These are decade old rivalries, but now the complicating factor in this strategic chain is the growing ties and a full-fledged strategic partnership between US and India. It has pushed China closer to Pakistan not only in the strategic domain, but also in the economic domain. The Pakistan's and China's growing ties are evidenced by cooperation in the conventional and the missile domain, as well as the presence of Chinese soldiers in the region of Kashmir. The borders of China, India and Pakistan actually converge in the old princely state of Jammu and Kashmir. Kashmir remains a point of contention. The strategic chain of China, India, Pakistan and US is worsening the South Asian strategic dynamic with each passing day and it is becoming more and more vulnerable to crisis instability, inadvertent escalation and the crossing of the nuclear threshold. Chellaney's arguments are useful for the research in terms that he discusses the implications of

³¹ Noor, Strategic Stability in South Asia, 23-35.

³² Chellaney, India-Pakistan-China Strategic Triangle, 5-15.

the emerging strategic chain between US-India-China-Pakistan, acknowledges the intensifying practice of nuclear deterrence in the region and highlights the need for mitigating it ³³

Dr. Zulfiqar Khan maintained that changing geostrategic dynamic in South Asia is exacerbating the mutual fear between US and China. As a corollary, it is heightening the mistrust between India and Pakistan as well. There is a lack of dialogue mechanism. On top of that, there are points of friction like the Kashmir issue and water disputes. In this delicate strategic environment, India created further insecurities by introducing its Cold Start Doctrine, that directly inspired Pakistan to develop tactical nuclear weapons and expand its deterrence posture into ‘full-spectrum deterrence’. South Asia is a volatile region, and these developments are continuing to raise mistrust, concerns, insecurities and anxieties. All nations will have to change their approach, in order to bring at least semblance of peace and stability in the region. The article is germane to the research questions as it throws light on the major points of contention - Kashmir issue and the Cold Start Doctrine – which keep the region from becoming peaceful.³⁴

Brig Arun Sahgal, PhD, (Retired), argues that persistent tensions between India and Pakistan have engendered deterrence stability. The issues between the two countries have deep historical roots with Kashmir being a perennial point of friction. There is growing asymmetry, mistrust, expanding nuclear arsenals, technological advancements, doctrinal mismatch and a serious dearth of Confidence Building Measures (CBMs). He claims that strategic stability in South Asia is under serious jeopardy, and unless there is a dialogue aimed at building trust between the Indian-Pakistan dyad, the risks of inadvertent escalation and crisis instability will continue to persist. How the strategic stability is being negatively impacted through the triangle is discussed at length in the article and makes it relevant to the research objectives.³⁵

Dr. Zulfiqar Khan, in another article, contended that since the partition, India and Pakistan are embroiled in an enduring rivalry, laden with mistrust, threat perceptions, and military and economic asymmetries. India is also locked in multiple disputes with its neighbors, especially China. The nuclear component has further complicated this South Asian triangle. Especially,

³³ Chellaney, The China-India-Pakistan Triangle, 1-12.

³⁴ Dr. Zulfiqar Khan, “Strategic Conundrum of US – China and India – Pakistan: A Perspective,” *Margalla Papers* 20, no.1, (2016): 38-42.

³⁵ Brig Arun Sahgal, PhD, (Retired), “Examining Efficacy of Strategic Stability in South Asia: An Analysis,” Albuquerque, New Mexico, Sandia National Laboratories, (2019).

in the Indo-Pakistan dyad, the confidence in the strategic stability has created instability at the lower rung of the conflict leading to the 'stability-instability paradox'. The situation has led to more offensive conventional and nuclear posturing. Though, there are nuclear doctrines in place, especially in case of India and China, but the evolving technologies and threats are motivating them to reassess their doctrinal positions in order to be prepared to respond to every rung of the escalation ladder. Author argues, that in this situation, instead of band wagoning with China, Pakistan should attempt to balance against its rivals in its own right. Dr. Khan extensively discusses that how the nuclear element and the trust deficit are major factors that carry the potential for undermining the strategic stability in the region, and, thus, his arguments are useful for verifying the hypothesis.³⁶

Mohd Aarif Rather in a prominent article asserts that China sees its nuclear arsenal as an imperative in the global geopolitics. India aims its weapons more towards balancing against China. Pakistan's nuclear weapons on the other hand are completely India-centric and are aimed at balancing against India in both the nuclear and the conventional realms. China is a recognized member of the nuclear club in the NPT. India and Pakistan are considered nuclear capable states, and status of India has been acknowledged through the civil nuclear agreement between India and the US. In this nuclear triangle, India perceives China as a direct threat, while China sees India as a milder challenge. On the other hand, relations between India and Pakistan are completely hostile and are on the tip of the nuclear threshold. China has bolstered Pakistan's nuclear position to balance against India. It is an extremely intricate web of relations which have transformed South Asia into an extremely volatile and menacing region. Rather examines the emergence of the triangle and explains how it transformed into an elusive web of relationships, threatening the strategic stability in the region. Therefore, his analysis can prove helpful for dealing with the problem statement of the research.³⁷

Manzoor Ahmad, Naveeda Yousaf, and Zahir Shah argued that US and Indian relationship in the past has transformed from complete estrangement to wider engagement. US has bolstered India to be a major actor in the South Asian region in order to balance against China and keep Pakistani and Chinese ambitions under check. This US strategy is highly destabilizing for the

³⁶ Dr. Zulfiqar Khan, "India-Pakistan: Emerging Trends in Strategic Dynamics," *The Korean Journal of International Studies* 13, no. 3, (2016): 578-590.

³⁷ Mohd Arif Rather, "Nuclear Dimensions of India-China-Pakistan Strategic Triangle," Centre for Security Studies, *School of International Studies, Central University of Gujarat* 04, no. 03, (2017): 18-32.

region, where already a nuclear triangle exists. US should be mindful of its actions in the region as important as South Asia, and think carefully how its Indian-centric initiatives can damage the tenuous relationships in the region. The article is extremely significant, as it discusses the major element – US actions in the region – which is rapidly destabilizing the region.³⁸

Muhammad Ishaque Fani insists that US and Indian relationship has transformed after the Cold War. The dissolution of Soviet Union has allowed their interests to be converged. According to a Pentagon report, US is facilitating India to become a major world power. China is a major reason behind the emerging Indo-US strategic partnership. The growing Indo-US closeness is not only worrisome for China, but it is highly perturbing for Pakistan. Pakistan is already conventionally inferior to India. Appearance of US at India's back creates severe challenges for Pakistan. Pakistan's and India's relations have always been antagonistic. There is growing apprehension in Pakistan due to recent developments. Even after developing closer relationship with China, Pakistan does not feel completely secure. Fani's discussion on the topic is important, as it explains how the Indo-US strategic partnership has been highly destabilizing for the South Asian region, especially for a weaker state like Pakistan.³⁹

While many researchers have made concentrated efforts at analyzing this triangle, they have not deeply explored the concept of strategic stability, the theory of nuclear deterrence, and how they connect with each other and provide a theoretical foundation for the China-Pak-India nuclear triangle. Moreover, researchers have not analyzed thoroughly the concept of a nuclear triangle, and its historical evolution through past precedents. Additionally, most debate on the issue revolves around the recent developments, and miss the late twentieth century political environment and dynamics that provide a broader picture for understanding the trajectory of the trilateral relationships between China, India and Pakistan, which eventually transformed into a nuclear triangle. The research aims to address all these gaps in the current literature on the topic.

³⁸ Manzoor Ahmad, Naveeda Yousaf, Zahir Shah, "US-India Strategic Bargaining and Power Balancing in South Asia," *Journal of Political Studies* 23, no. 02, (2016): 441-455.

³⁹ Muhammad Ishaque Fani, "The Indo- US Strategic Partnership in Post 9/11: Implication for Pakistan," *University of Punjab* 10, no. 2, (2009): 132-143.

1.9 Hypothesis

India-China-Pakistan nuclear triangle is undermining and negatively impacting the strategic stability in the South Asian Region.

Conclusion

The India-China-Pakistan nuclear triangle is a complex political reality undermining the strategic stability in South Asia. It is important to explore the issue in order to make an informed analysis on how the triangle is affecting the strategic stability in the region. The research is significant in the terms that it is addressing the gaps in the current literature and will help the scholars and policy makers getting a broader and coherent perspective on the challenging political realities of the 21st century. Qualitative research design has been adopted to provide the readers a comprehensive understanding on the state of strategic stability in South Asia.

Chapter 2

CONCEPTUAL AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Introduction

A conceptual framework and underlying theories are defined as “the edifice that provides a theoretical and conceptual foundation to the research, allowing researchers to examine and analyze complex phenomena.” Research, that is conducted without utilizing key concepts and theories as a foundation, is usually regarded as naïve empiricism. It is called naïve, because we need concepts and theories to make sense of the data we collect. Raw data is not of much use unless we have concepts and theories, that establish relationships between key variables. Therefore, such a framework gives meaning to the entire research process.

A conceptual framework and its theoretical foundation are usually written and analyzed in the beginning of the research process. That is, because, purpose of the conceptual framework and theories are not limited to giving meaning to the research. They also guide and underpin the entire research process. Researchers have to take inspiration from the concepts and theories that generate them to make significant decisions during their research process. Decisions like what research design to choose, for instance, experimental or case-study, or what research strategy to adopt, for instance, qualitative or quantitative, and what will be the relationship between concepts and research, i.e., whether the research will be deductive or inductive. Therefore, a conceptual framework and guiding theories are the most crucial components of any research process, without which, the research will lack any substance or practical value.

This chapter will thoroughly analyze and explore the concept of strategic stability and the theory of nuclear deterrence. As the purpose of the study is to reassess the strategic stability in South Asia, in the context of China-Pak-India nuclear triangle, it is indeed imperative to have an unambiguous understanding of the concept. Moreover, the theory of nuclear deterrence will also be deeply scrutinized in the chapter. As the theory of nuclear deterrence is directly in conflict with the concept of strategic stability, where the two cannot exist simultaneously, it is important to explore it to assess the important features that can determine the presence or the absence of strategic stability.

2.1 The Concept of Strategic Stability

The term ‘strategic stability’ entered the national security lexicon after the advent of the nuclear weapons, most prominently, during the Cold War. There has never been a unanimously agreed upon definition of the concept. Edward Warner, who served as the U.S. Secretary of Defense’s representative to the New Strategic Arms Treaty (New START) talks, has observed that the term ‘strategic stability’ is used in three broad ways:

- Most narrowly, strategic stability describes the absence of incentives to use nuclear weapons first (first-strike stability), lack of possibility of preemption during a crisis (crisis stability), and the absence of incentives to build up a nuclear force (arms race stability);
- More broadly, it describes the absence of armed conflict between nuclear-armed states;
- Most broadly, it describes a regional or global security environment, in which states enjoy peaceful and harmonious relations.⁴⁰

The narrowest insight into the concept implies a lack of incentive to pre-empt or strike first. However, as the Warner’s analysis demonstrate, strategic stability can be understood in different ways: narrow, broad or in-between.

Regardless of the lack of a concrete definition, multiple scholars agree over three basic ideas when it comes to understanding strategic stability:

1. The theory of nuclear deterrence and the concept of strategic stability have a paradoxical relationship.
2. The environment of strategic stability is created through a rough combination of crisis stability, arms race stability, and most importantly, first-strike stability.
3. Survivable second-strike capability on the both sides upholds and reinforces strategic stability.⁴¹

⁴⁰ James M. Acton, "Reclaiming Strategic Stability," *Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College*, (2013): 1-20.

⁴¹ Acton, *Reclaiming Strategic Stability*, 1-20.

The theory of nuclear deterrence and how it relates to the intellectual tradition and practical implementation of the concept of strategic stability will be addressed much later in this chapter. It is much more important to first understand the basic idea of strategic stability, through the analysis of the concepts that directly extend from it: crisis stability, arms race stability and the first-strike stability. In order to get a further grip on the concept, its historical evolution underscored by the policy debate around developing second-strike capability, and the various debates that surround it since the Cold War till the 21st century will be discussed.⁴²

2.1.1 Crisis Stability, Arms Race Stability and First-Strike Stability

The first time the concept of crisis stability was comprehensively addressed was in the Thomas Schelling's 1960 masterpiece, '*Strategy of Conflict*'. He argued that in a dyadic nuclear relationship, both sides might fear that if they do not strike first, they might be struck by the enemy and lose their ability to retaliate. This situation, specifically in times of an international crisis, creates strong incentives to preempt, and consequently heightens the risks of nuclear war to an unacceptable extent. Crisis stability does not just depend on the size and quality of the strategic forces; many other factors like emotions, pressures, bad advice, miscalculation, misperceptions or poor communication impinge on it.⁴³

Arms race stability, on the other hand, is the incentive to expand a nuclear force, qualitatively or quantitatively, mainly due to the fear that in the times of a crisis, a smaller nuclear force might give the enemy advantage in striking first.⁴⁴

First-strike stability, unlike the crisis stability, is a more mathematical concept. First strike instability is created through the complexity and scale of technical features of each side's strategic forces. These characteristics (the hardness of silos, the accuracy of missiles, the effect of missile interceptors, etc.) are examples of the characteristic that can make a side complacent and incentivize it to strike first. Thus, first-strike stability is something that can be quantitatively analyzed.⁴⁵

⁴² Colin S. Gray, "Strategic Stability Reconsidered," *The MIT Press on Behalf of American Academy of Arts & Sciences* 109, no. 4, (1979): 135-154.

⁴³ Acton, Reclaiming Strategic Stability, 1-20.

⁴⁴ Acton, Reclaiming Strategic Stability, 1-20.

⁴⁵ Acton, Reclaiming Strategic Stability, 1-20.

The most important factor influencing all three concepts is that heightened crisis instabilities, arms race instabilities and first-strike instabilities are created mostly in the apparent absence of a survivable second-strike capability. In order to understand the emergence of the concept of second-strike stability, and its incorporation in the nuclear policy of multiple nuclear armed states, it is crucial to delve in to the historical evolution of the concept of strategic stability during the Cold War.

2.1.2 Historical Evolution of the Concept of Strategic Stability

The concept of strategic stability emerged in the wake of the nuclear revolution of the mid-twentieth century. The major ideas that formed the backdrop against which the concept of strategic stability emerged were introduced right after the nuclear revolution, in the 1950s. It is nearly impossible to credit a single person or a piece of literature for expounding the concept. Nearly, all scholars, and government and military officials were grappling with the same set of challenges and discussing similar solutions. However, these earlier discussions did not specifically involve the use of the term ‘strategic stability’. The discussion revolved around the more general idea of stability, and focused distinctly on the challenges that were presented by the notion of crisis instability.⁴⁶

Bernard Brodie’s edited volume, *‘The Absolute Weapon’*, focused upon analyzing the challenges presented by the nuclear revolution. It is usually revered for laying down the groundwork for the theory of nuclear deterrence and the concept of strategic stability. Brodie argued that the possibility of a retaliation by the adversary removes the incentives to launch a surprise attack aimed at decapitating the enemy through targeting its strategic forces. Therefore, Brodie underscored the vulnerability of the US strategic forces as the core challenge, and achieving ‘assured destruction’ capability through making the strategic forces survivable as the only possible solution. The three concepts of ‘vulnerability’, ‘survivability’ and ‘assured destruction’ would be central to the most subsequent discussion on the nuclear strategy.⁴⁷

As the USSR acquired its own effective nuclear capability by the early 1950s, the fear of a surprise attack in the minds of the US officials is the factor that would eventually give birth to the concept of strategic stability. A 1950 study for the Joint Chiefs of Staff concluded that in

⁴⁶ Michael S. Gerson, "The Origins of Strategic Stability," *Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College* 109, no. 4, (2012): 1-30.

⁴⁷ Gerson, *The Origins of Strategic Stability*, 1-30.

the strategic environment prevalent at the time, the nation striking first had massive advantages to gain. It is true that the USA enjoyed a nuclear superiority over USSR, but the considerable Soviet conventional superiority, combined with a nuclear capability, created extraordinary opportunities for the USSR to cripple the US nation, if it was to strike first. The defining feature of this strategic environment was the fact that though US had the numbers in the nuclear terms, its nuclear assets were still 'vulnerable' to a first strike.⁴⁸

Albert Wohlstetter, then a researcher at the RAND Corporation, argued in his seminal study that this vulnerability was largely to be blamed on the US dependence on solely its Airforce, Strategic Air Command (SAC), for a potential delivery of the nuclear weapons. The strategic bombers were located in the air bases in the USA, and to launch an attack on the Soviets, they had to first stop for refueling in the air bases in Europe. Both the bases in the USA and Europe were highly prone to a Soviet attack, in times of peace, and especially in times of crisis. Thus, reliance on a single delivery platform made the US nuclear forces highly vulnerable. In a later article, '*The Delicate Balance of Terror*', Wohlstetter argued that just attaining nuclear parity with the enemy cannot be regarded as exercising achieving effective strategic stability. It is the ability to survive a first attack and retaliate in kind that deters an enemy from pre-empting. Thus, he concluded, that US nuclear forces needed to be 'survivable'.⁴⁹

It was a period of marked strategic instability, as in the minds of US officials, the available solution to the problem of vulnerability, at that time, was to strike before Soviets could strike. Thus, pre-emption was the core element of the early US war strategy. In fancy terms, this strategy was and still is widely known as 'massive retaliation'. Though impressive and novel delivery systems like long-range ballistic missiles emerged, they still failed to solve the problem of survivability. Moreover, the pendulum of strategic superiority swung between the US and USSR during the 1950s, but the problem of pre-emptive mentality and strategic instability remained unresolved.⁵⁰

The suggestions made by the government and military officials in order to make US nuclear forces more survivable offered extremely expensive and impractical options. Therefore, eventually, President Eisenhower began to consider strategic engagement with the Soviet

⁴⁸ John D. Steinbruner, "National Security and the Concept of Strategic Stability," *The Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Sage Publications, (1978).

⁴⁹ Gerson, *The Origins of Strategic Stability*, 1-30.

⁵⁰ Gerson, *The Origins of Strategic Stability*, 1-30.

Union as a viable option. The purpose of the strategic engagement was supposed to create an opportunity for discussing the threat of a surprise attack. Thus, the proposal ‘Open Skies’ was made by the US to the Soviet Union, arguing for a guarantee from both sides not to launch a surprise attack. Though the proposal was rejected by the Soviets, it served as a groundbreaking initiative, through which the concept of strategic stability would emerge and thrive. Further negotiations took place between both the parties during the 1950s, but they remained unfruitful.⁵¹

While strategic engagement was being contemplated and pursued as an option, the navy introduced ideas to the survivability debate that would serve as the key feature of the concept of strategic stability. The navy argued that it is not important to maintain numerical parity in nuclear forces. Moreover, land and air-based platforms can never be completely invincible. Therefore, in order to have stable nuclear relations and eliminate the fear of the surprise attack, second-strike capability should be pursued. Second-strike capability is an assured capability to survive a first attack and inflict complete destruction or unacceptable damage on the enemy. Such second-strike capability can fairly be achieved through a limited force of Submarine Launched Ballistic Missiles (SLBMs). Submarines are elusive platforms, nearly impossible to locate by the enemy. This factor makes them highly survivable.⁵²

By 1960, US navy began to deploy nuclear-powered submarines armed with 16 Polaris SLBMs each. Moreover, Richard Nixon, the US President and Soviet General Secretary, Leonid Brezhnev, signed the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty (ABM) and interim Strategic Arms Limitations Talks/Treaty (SALT) agreement on May 26, 1972, in Moscow. For the first time, during the Cold War, the United States and Soviet Union agreed to limit the number of nuclear missiles in their arsenals.⁵³

Thus, an environment of ‘mutual vulnerability’ emerged in the 1960s and took hold by the 1970s. The US and Soviet relationship dynamic was thus described by the well-known maxim of ‘Mutually Assured Destruction’ (MAD). The problem of vulnerability was resolved through achieving survivable second-strike capability in the form of SLBMs, and the problem of uncertainty was addressed considerably through strategic engagement. Thus, the concept of

⁵¹ Gray, *Strategic Stability Reconsidered*, 135-154.

⁵² Melvin L. Best, John Wilson, Andrei A. Piontkowsky, eds. *“Strategic Stability in the Post-Cold War World and the Future of Nuclear Disarmament,”* (Washington D.C: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1995), 5-25.

⁵³ Graeme P. Herd, *“Great Powers and Strategic Stability in the 21st Century; Competing Visions of World Order,”* 1st ed. (London and New York: Routledge Global Security Studies, (2010): 10-25.

strategic stability emerged, entailing ‘assured destruction’ for both sides in the event of a nuclear war, and removed the incentives to strike first to a reasonable extent.⁵⁴

2.1.3 Understanding Strategic Stability in the 21st Century: Revision or Rethinking?

Today, strategic stability has become an umbrella term used by scholars and government officials. It incorporates and conflicts with a set of overlapping concepts (such as mutually assured destruction), theories (for example, nuclear deterrence), policies (massive retaliation; flexible response; no-first-use), and treaties (Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty). Especially, the ABM treaty was understood as the cornerstone of strategic stability for multiple reasons. Ballistic Missile Defence (BMD) harms the state of mutual vulnerability, by making one side reasonably resilient to other side side’s potential retaliatory measures. It creates incentives to strike first. Therefore, US unilateral withdrawal from the treaty raised questions for the state of strategic stability in the 21st century. However, some scholars have dismissed the BMD debate, arguing that sufficient number of nuclear weapons on one side can ensure that they can retaliate in kind and will be able to penetrate the pre-emptors missile defences.⁵⁵

A major debate surrounding strategic stability is that, while some authors want to hold rigidly on to the principles established for bipolar strategic stability, the others argue for a rethinking of the concept in the world that is becoming increasingly multipolar. Undoubtedly, the strategic environment has evolved, as there is an emerging nuclear relationship of US with China, nuclear competition between neighbors and arch-enemies in the Indian subcontinent, and challenges posed by the proliferators like North Korea and Iran. Frank P. Harvey, in his article, ‘*The Future of Strategic Stability and Nuclear Deterrence*’, made the case that while Cold War thinkers were focused upon numbers and attaining strategic balance with the adversary, a more complex approach towards the concept of strategic stability is required in the current strategic environment.

He argues that strategic stability should not be, and should never have been, about numerical balance, but about creating stable relationships. He asserts that while US is not exactly friends with Russia and China, the increased economic engagement and interdependence, that is a feature of the 21st century, make these relationships somewhat stable. That means there are low

⁵⁴ Gray, *Strategic Stability Reconsidered*, 135-154

⁵⁵ Frank P. Harvey, "The Future of Strategic Stability and Nuclear Deterrence," *Sage Publications, Ltd. on Behalf of the Canadian International Council* 58, no. 2, (2003): 321-346.

chances of these states going on an all-out war, and the pursuit of numerical parity is becoming irrelevant in these equations. The transition in the nuclear environment was evident by the moderate Russian response to US withdrawal from the ABM treaty, in 2002. Russia and China probably do have an understanding that US augmentation of its strategic forces is perhaps aimed towards rogue states and regimes, not them. However, there have been multiple and perturbing developments since Harvey wrote. Russian war in Ukraine and spiraling competition between US and China throws into doubt the assumption that these relationships are and will stay reasonably stable.⁵⁶

Gregory D. Koblentz, in his article, '*Strategic Stability in the Second Nuclear Age*', makes similar arguments. He asserts that second nuclear age is substantially different from the Cold War period, as that period was defined by a single bipolar strategic competition. In the 21st century, there are trilateral nuclear relationships like India, China and Pakistan, and there are rogue states and regimes who undermine the whole concept of strategic stability by their disregard for their nation and people. Such rogue states might be willing to take risks that rational leaders of established nations would not dream of. The situation makes the global strategic environment highly unstable. Furthermore, Koblentz identified three major challenges to strategic stability in the 21st century: BMDs, Anti-satellite weapons (ASAT) and conventional counterforce capabilities.⁵⁷

The debates surrounding BMDs and how exactly they can be destabilizing is already addressed earlier in this chapter. ASAT threaten strategic stability in two significant ways. A successful targeting of the enemy's ASAT can undermine its intelligence and surveillance, thus, making a first strike appealing. Second, ASAT can target the enemy's space-based command and control system, making a decapitating strike feasible. Thus, ASAT can create massive first-strike instabilities during the time of crisis. Conventional counterforce weapons also undermine strategic stability in two significant ways. During the Cold War, USA and USSR relied heavily on nuclear weapons for countervalue targetting. However, technological advancement has allowed nations, especially USA and Russia, to develop weapons which can be used for counterforce goals - targeting the enemy's strategic forces. First of all, a conventionally armed missile has the same flight profile and similar flight path as a nuclear armed missile. It can

⁵⁶ Harvey, *The Future of Strategic Stability*, 321-346

⁵⁷ Gregory Koblentz, "Strategic Stability in the Second Nuclear Age," *Council on Foreign Relations*, (2014): 1-10.

create massive ambiguity on the other side, creating the fear of an impending nuclear attack and prompt the enemy into striking first. Secondly, conventional weapons can perform counterforce functions without using the nuclear weapons, which might lead to excessive vertical escalation in a conflict. Thus, the technological advancements in the 21st century threaten the global strategic environment and create the need for some revisions to the concept of strategic stability.⁵⁸

Robert Legvold and Christopher F. Chyba, argued in 2020, that in this day and age, there are many overlapping nuclear relationships threatening the global strategic environment. These relationships overlap in the sense that US initiatives towards augmenting its strategic forces, which might be aimed towards North Korea and Iran, generate responses in Russia and China. Chinese response to US augmentation creates strategic anxieties in India. Indian reaction to Chinese developments creates novel threats for Pakistan. In the midst of all this, Israel has a recessed nuclear capability creating uncertainties in an already destabilized Middle East. USA and USSR are modernizing all three legs of their nuclear triad and China, India and Pakistan are following their lead.

Technological advancements have also posed multiple challenges like ambiguity regarding conventional and nuclear weapons and potential for space-based nuclear war fighting. In a nutshell, 21st century strategic environment is extremely complex and the Cold War principles of strategic stability cannot be mindlessly replicated in this environment. Different countries are flirting with varied options. For instance, USA and Russian officials have considered advancing their hybrid and cyber capabilities along with nuclear and conventional options, in order to enforce a 'Comprehensive Deterrence'. These developments will only undermine strategic stability, as there can be no strategic stability when there is a spirit of nuclear deterrence generating arms race, crises and first-strike instability. Some countries are considering a 'limited nuclear options' strategy while others are rethinking their 'minimum deterrence' nuclear doctrines. How all these ideas and initiatives factor in strengthening or undermining strategic stability is vehemently debated.⁵⁹

Even in the 21st century, there is no agreed upon definition of strategic stability. Some understand it as a numerical balance between two adversaries' arsenals while others regard it

⁵⁸ Koblenz, *Strategic Stability in the Second Nuclear Age*, 1-10.

⁵⁹ Robert Legvold and Christopher F. Chyba, "Meeting the Challenges of a New Nuclear Age," *The MIT Press on Behalf of American Academy of Arts & Sciences 149*, no. 2, (2020): 6-16.

as low likelihood of crisis instability. C. Dale Walton and Colin S. Gray point out two general approaches to the concept: weapons oriented and holistic. They argue that weapons-oriented approach is an extremely narrow approach and it dominated the Cold War thinking. It was excessively focused upon the quantity and quality of nuclear arsenals – characteristic of arms race stabilities and instabilities. The approach did not disappear with the end of the Cold War. Two Strategic Arms Reduction Treaties (START I and II) were signed in the early 1990s, by USA and Russia. In 2011, New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START), between USA and Russia, entered into force. However, nuclear weapons are only a feature of war, not the cause of it. Any hot war or cold war usually has ideological, geopolitical or religious disagreements that initiate it. Therefore, in the emerging multipolar environment, characterizing intertwined and complex and overlapping relationships, a holistic approach to strategic stability is required. Thus, strategic stability can be attained by striving for stable relationships in the global environment. A dynamic global peace might be a utopia, but its pursuit can enhance global strategic stability. When there is a stable strategic environment, the sizes of the arsenals become increasingly irrelevant. Thus, the goal of the nuclear armed governments in the present should be to contribute to strategic stability by looking at it holistically, and abandon their obsession with the numbers.⁶⁰

Scholars have also criticized nuclear deterrence arguing that it creates a security insurance for the states allowing them to unreservedly engage in warfare on a sub-conventional level. This phenomenon is known as the ‘stability-instability paradox’ and demonstrates the core contradiction within the deterrence and stability literature. Indo-Pak conflict is usually cited as a quintessential example of the stability-instability paradox. Since India and Pakistan have become overtly nuclear, they have engaged in multiple crises, falling slightly short of war - most notably in 2001, 2008, 2016 and 2019.

Additionally, Dr. Naeem Salik has argued that the mere presence of nuclear weapons can provide some form of stability at the strategic level. He asserts that restraint exercised on both sides during major crises like the Cuban Missile Crisis and the Berlin Crisis makes it evident that nuclear-armed states can have a lower inclination towards resorting to war. He also discusses the case of India and Pakistan as an example – two arch rivals who have not fought

⁶⁰ Elbridge Colby and Colin S. Gray, *The Geopolitics of Strategic Stability: Looking Beyond Cold Warriors and Nuclear Weapons*, Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College, (2013): 1-20.

a major war, regardless of multiple crises, since acquiring nuclear capability. However, he still asserts that there is a need to redefine the concept of strategic stability in the unique 21st century nuclear environment.⁶¹

While many authors have advocated for a rethinking or revision of the concept of strategic stability, and there have been some initiatives in this direction, it appears that escaping the Cold War mentality has not been an easy task for the scholars, practitioners and decision-makers, world-wide. Even today, the Cold War lexicon of survivability, vulnerability, assured destruction, MAD, second-strike capability, pre-emption, crisis stability, arms race stability, first-strike stability, surprise attack, massive retaliation, and mutual vulnerability dominates the discourse on strategic stability.

2.2 The Theory of Nuclear Deterrence

Nuclear deterrence conceptually and practically conflicts with the concept of strategic stability. It is the ability of the two adversaries to deter each other from attacking first, with the threat of assured destruction. This dynamic undermines strategic stability through generating arms race instability, crisis instability, and first-strike instability. Objective of exercising nuclear deterrence leads to nations augmenting their nuclear arsenals, which leads to an arms race. Such an arms race creates misperceptions, miscalculations, trust deficit and an unstable environment, where crisis stability and first-strike stability are difficult to maintain. Nuclear deterrence is based on the awareness of two nuclear-armed adversaries that costs of attacking first might be much higher than the benefits, and, thus, it is best to exercise restraint. It relies heavily on the capacity of both the states to retaliate and inflict absolute destruction or unacceptable damage on the other. Thus, it is primarily based on a cost-benefit analysis. In this spirit, nuclear weapons are sometimes regarded as the weapons of peace. However, nuclear weapons can only be weapons of peace if they generate strategic stability. Just with deterrence, more problems are created than are solved.⁶²

⁶¹ Naeem Salik, "Cold War Strategic Stability Between Superpowers: Are There Any Lessons for India and Pakistan?" *Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad* 18, no. 4, (1996): 73-86.

⁶² Attar Rabbani, "Nuclear Deterrence," *Kapur Surya Foundation* 21, no. 4, (2017): 10-25.

2.2.1 Deterrence by Punishment and Deterrence by Denial

The basic tenets of the concept of deterrence apply on the situations where both sides are nuclear-armed. When only one side is nuclear armed, the other side will be definitely deterred and it does not call for much theoretical contemplation.⁶³ Most scholars have identified two major types of deterrence: deterrence by punishment and deterrence by denial. Deterrence by denial is exercised through signaling the enemy that it will be denied any objectives that it aims to achieve through launching a nuclear attack. Deterrence by punishment is exercised through making the enemy aware that there will be significant retaliation and unacceptable consequences - usually through destruction of cities and massive civilian casualties - if it launches a first-attack.⁶⁴ The practice of deterrence is as old as the history of human conflict. However, historically, deterrence was practiced only through denial. Nations lacked the capability to inflict total destruction or unacceptable damage on each other.⁶⁵ However, the advent of the nuclear weapons has revolutionized the practice of war-making. Before, primary political aim used to be to win the war. During the Cold War, it became to avoid the war. Deterrence has a major role to play in the state of these revolutionized military affairs.⁶⁶

2.2.2 General Deterrence and Immediate Deterrence

Some scholars have also categorized deterrence into the camps of general deterrence and immediate deterrence. General deterrence is the state of affairs between two nuclear armed adversaries, who do not have any concrete plans to attack each other. Immediate deterrence comes into play in the times of crisis, when both sides have massive fears of pre-emptive strike from the other side, and are desperate to deter it. Undoubtedly, deterrence is practiced extremely differently in these two situations.⁶⁷ Moreover, within nuclear deterrence, weapons that have a utility for first-strike are considered bad nukes, while the weapons providing second-strike capability are regarded as good nukes.⁶⁸

⁶³ Frank Harvey and Patrick James, "Nuclear Deterrence Theory: The Record of Aggregate Testing and an Alternative Research Agenda," *Sage Publications, Ltd.* 12, no. 1, (1992): 17-45.

⁶⁴ Kevin P. Chilton, "On US Nuclear Deterrence," *Air University Press* 11, no. 4, (2017): 2-14.

⁶⁵ C. Raja Mohan, "The Tragedy of Nuclear Deterrence," *Social Scientist* 14, no. 4, (1985): 3-19.

⁶⁶ James Lo, "Nuclear Deterrence in South Asia: Theory and Practice," *Sage Publications, Ltd. on Behalf of the Canadian International Council* 58, no. 3, (2003): 395-414.

⁶⁷ Harvey and James, Nuclear Deterrence Theory, 17-45.

⁶⁸ Mohan, The Tragedy of Nuclear Deterrence, 3-19.

2.2.3 Requisites for Effective Deterrence

There are four major requisites that can assure that deterrence is practiced effectively. First and foremost, it is the physical capacity, or in other words, capability. If a party to the conflict does not have capability to deny or punish, deterrence cannot exist. Second important requisite is credibility or will.⁶⁹ Credibility demonstrates that party to the conflict is not making empty threats and its promises to deny or punish are genuine and credible. Third important component to ensure effective execution of deterrence is awareness or communication. Parties to the conflict need to communicate precisely and unambiguously to the adversary their will to deny or punish, if their red lines are crossed.⁷⁰

The last requisite is based on the 'Rational Actor Model'. The model assumes that both parties to the conflict will be led by rational and sensible leaders, who will act patiently, reasonably and judiciously in the time of conflict and crisis. Thus, for deterrence to be exercised effectively, it is important that both the parties to conflict are led by rational decision-makers.⁷¹

2.2.4 Countervalue and Counterforce Weapons

Moreover, there are two categories of nuclear weapons that the states usually acquire to deter their adversaries. First category of weapons is countervalue weapons. They have the capacity to inflict unacceptable damage through destroying cities and causing massive civilian casualties. Secondly, there are counterforce weapons which can be used to target the enemy's strategic assets and key infrastructure.⁷²

2.2.5 Nuclear Brinkmanship

It is extremely important to understand Thomas Schelling's concept of 'Brinkmanship' in order to understand nuclear deterrence. It has been argued that what is the point of having nuclear weapons to begin with, when states pursue strategic stability, which is nothing less than a promise to not to actually use these weapons. So, when there are weapons on both sides, and no intention to use them, don't they just cancel each other out, taking the situation back to as it

⁶⁹ Keir A. Lieber and Daryl G. Press, "The New Era of Nuclear Weapons, Deterrence, and Conflict," *Strategic Studies Quarterly*, Air University Press 10, no. 5, (2015): 31-42.

⁷⁰ Mohan, *The Tragedy of Nuclear Deterrence*, 3-19.

⁷¹ Mohan, *The Tragedy of Nuclear Deterrence*, 3-19.

⁷² Donald M. Snow, "Current Nuclear Deterrence Thinking: An Overview and Review," *International Studies Quarterly*; Wiley on Behalf of The International Studies Association 23, no. 3, (1979): 445-486.

was in the beginning of the conflict. Also, possibly, what political motive can be achieved through these weapons; after all, the real purpose of the military is the realization of the political aims of a nation.

Thomas Schelling addresses these doubts by introducing the concept of brinkmanship into the nuclear deterrence theory. He argues that states do not utilize nuclear weapons by directly threatening their use, but by leaving things to chances and escalating the risks to the level unacceptable to the enemy. In this game of chicken, one party is eventually forced to back down, and the other party is able to achieve its political objectives. A major instance to explain the concept of brinkmanship, hypothetically speaking, is that Cuba might not be worth undertaking a full-fledged nuclear war, but it must be worth creating a 5% risk of it. Thus, through brinkmanship, especially in times of crisis, the utility of nuclear weapons is fully realized in achieving political aims and guaranteeing national security.⁷³

2.2.6 Deterrence Theory: Critique

Regardless of these extraordinary claims, the concept of nuclear deterrence is not revered unanimously and universally. The theory has evolved and materialized after a decades long discourse. Multiple scholars have pointed out its shortcomings, failings and contradictions during the process.

For instance, the advocates of peace in the USA lament the fact that instead of preventing arms race, the practice of deterrence created massive arms race instabilities in the US-Soviet relationship. Both sides continued to augment their strategic arsenals in order to deter the other side. The scenario throws into doubt the whole assumption that nuclear weapons and their power to deter can actually perpetuate peace in inter-state relations and are capable of creating strategic stability.⁷⁴

Scholars have also argued that the concept of deterrence developed during the Cold War cannot be used as a blueprint for understanding all conflicts. Conflicts differ in their respective characteristics. For instance, Indo-Pak conflict is significantly differently from the Cold War

⁷³ Robert Powell, "Nuclear Deterrence Theory, Nuclear Proliferation, and National Missile Defense," *International Security*, *The MIT Press* 27, no. 4, (2003): 86-118.

⁷⁴ Michael McGwire, "Nuclear Deterrence," *Oxford University Press on Behalf of the Royal Institute of International Affairs* 82, no. 4, (2006): 771-784.

conflict, due to geographical proximity and psychological baggage of Indo-Pak historical relations.⁷⁵

Another problem identified by scholars and experts on deterrence is the contradiction within 'rational actor model'. For deterrence to work, both sides have to act sensibly and reasonably, and most importantly, patiently. The primary aim would be to avert a nuclear disaster causing an existential threat to their nation. The concept of deterrence conveniently assumes that this will actually be the case on both sides. However, a deeper analysis of the underlying principles demonstrate that rational actor model might not hold in multiple cases, especially in times of crisis. The fog of war, accidents, misperception, domestic pressures, miscommunication and multiple other factors can lead to leaders behaving irrationally. Furthermore, the underlying logic, that all leaders will behave in a way favorable to their people is not a truism. History has proved, that there are rogue leaders, who are not much concerned with the lives of their civilians, and are willing to take extraordinary risks in order to meet their parochial objectives. Thus, there are multiple contradictions within the rational actor model, but it continues to underpin the nuclear deterrence.⁷⁶

Michael MccGwire, in his article on nuclear deterrence, argued that by the 1970s and 80s, the confidence in deterrence was already shaking and it was being questioned. MAD was upheld in the spirit of balance of numbers and terror. The US establishment adopted the 'Countervailing Strategy' in the 1970s, which aimed at reassuming American nuclear superiority over the Soviets and dominating the Soviets in a war. It challenged the entire ethic of deterrence and demonstrated US officials' disenchantment with the idea of maintaining a balance. In 1983, Strategic Defense Initiative (Star Wars), was launched, which effectively extended the nuclear competition to the realm of space. MccGwire argues that deterrence dogma began to crumble due to some underlying drawbacks. For instance, the theory was inspired by the disciplines of economics and mathematics, rather than politics. It is a major problem as the theory, after all, had to be exercised in the realm of politics. Secondly, there was complete absence of Soviets from the discourse on the nuclear deterrence, which undoubtedly made it sketchy, partial and imperfect. Lastly, he claimed that the entire edifice of deterrence and stability was based on the imaginations of worst-case scenarios, especially of pre-emption

⁷⁵ Lo, Nuclear Deterrence in South Asia, 395-414.

⁷⁶ Leon V. Sigal, "The Logic of Deterrence in Theory and Practice," *International Organization; University of Wisconsin Press* 33, no. 4, (1979): 567-579.

from the other side. The theory and the concept could have been much more cohesive and coherent if it was, instead, based on higher order objectives like establishing cooperative relations with the Soviets.⁷⁷

C. Raja Mohan, in his article, '*The Tragedy of Nuclear Deterrence*' also argued that deterrence with strategic stability is nothing more than a delusion. It is founded upon a contradiction, and that is the reason that while purporting to perpetuate peace, it leads to unhalted weapon augmentation and technological advancements in the military affairs of the adversaries. Thus, within the context of deterrence, arms limitation is an elusive utopia, which has never achieved anything concrete. He claimed that the entire SALT process, in the 1970s, was a smokescreen; instead of facilitating genuine arsenal reduction, it sanctioned the arsenal parity at horribly high levels.⁷⁸

2.2.7 Emerging Challenges

Apart from the underlying shortcomings and contradictions within the concept of deterrence, there are some emerging challenges to the deterrence orthodoxy in the 21st century. For instance, it was the threat of retaliatory unacceptable damage through countervalue weapons that succeeded in deterring the adversaries in striking first. Technological advancements have led to development of precision-guided counterforce arsenals with high accuracy. Such weapons create the potential for destroying the enemy's strategic assets in a first strike and disarming it from the capability of retaliating with a matching force. This development can, might and will create tendencies in leaders to seriously consider first strikes on their adversaries. This is a potentially dreadful situation where strategic stability might fail miserably. Secondly, as mentioned above, with the acquisition of nuclear weapons by rogue states, like North Korea, the entire concept of rational decision makers being deterred by the risks their actions might create for their nation is thrown into doubt. Thus, nuclear deterrence theory is losing its esteem with 21st century technological advancements and international developments.⁷⁹

⁷⁷ MccGwire, Nuclear Deterrence, 771-784.

⁷⁸ Mohan, The Tragedy of Nuclear Deterrence, 3-19.

⁷⁹ Snow, Current Nuclear Deterrence, 445-486.

Conclusion

The theory of nuclear deterrence and the concept of strategic stability have the most unnerving and perturbing paradoxical relationship. Since the advent of nuclear weapons, they have emerged and evolved side by side, in direct conflict with each other. One cannot be understood, pursued or envisaged without the other. There have always been some inherent contradictions and shortcomings within the theory and the concept, when it comes to making a case for their relevance in securing international peace. Moreover, in the 21st century, multiple challenges have emerged that have exposed them to criticism, and inspired sentiments for their rethinking and revision. However, these cardinal concepts, that have guided the nuclear journey of the Superpowers in the twentieth century, have not become completely irrelevant in this day and age. Surprisingly, the concept of strategic stability and the theory of nuclear deterrence are still intellectually analyzed, addressed and scrutinized in the spirit of their historically original lexicon, ideas and debates.

The chapter has laid down the conceptual foundation of the research through a thorough analysis of the two important concepts that can guide a triangular relationship in the international relations. The next chapter will discuss and evaluate the historical Cold War triangle of USA, USSR and France, in order to set a precedent for nuclear triangular relationships. Historical precedents can indeed be an inspiration and source of key lessons for managing a current scenario, in hand, judiciously.

Chapter 3

HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF NUCLEAR TRIANGLES: FRENCH-AMERICAN-SOVIET TRIANGLE

Introduction

The preceding chapter laid down the conceptual framework of the research with a comprehensive analysis of the concept of strategic stability and the theory of nuclear deterrence. This chapter will make a sound attempt to discuss and analyze the historical Cold War triangle of USA, USSR and France. This Cold War triangle can be crucial and extremely pertinent for understanding the general nature of nuclear triangles. It will also enable the scholars and the policy makers to draw lessons from the achievements and failures of the preceding nations in tackling such complex international scenarios.

Since the nuclear revolution of the 1940s, China-Pakistan-India triangle is certainly not the first one to emerge on the global strategic realm. The three decades after the WWII, demonstrate distinctly how attainment of atomic weapons by different intertwined nations can lead to a strategic entanglement, resulting in a nuclear triangle. With the emergence of such a triangle, general deterrence, immediate deterrence, and strategic stability come under a threat. It can also lead to heightened nuclear deterrence causing crisis instability, arms race instability, and first-strike instability. The three forms of stabilities, which fall under the umbrella of overall strategic stability, can certainly be undermined in this general international environment. Though not as serious and threatening as the South Asian strategic triangle, USA, France and USSR undoubtedly got embroiled into a triangular relationship; willingly or unwillingly.⁸⁰

In order to grasp the Cold War's triangular relationship, it is extremely important to understand the context against which the nineteenth century nuclear discourse was evolving. Moreover, it is important to understand all the intentions, actions and reactions, which contributed to a

⁸⁰ Keith W. Baum, "Two's Company, Three's a Crowd: The Eisenhower Administration, France, and Nuclear Weapons," *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, Center for the Study of the Presidency and Congress 20, no. 2, (1990): 315-328.

scenario, in which a triangular relationship became inescapable. Lastly, history is the best teacher for each and every one wishing to contemplate difficult challenges in the present. Thus, there are lessons to be learnt from this Cold War triangle, which can guide the South Asian triangle.⁸¹

3.1 The Nuclear Triangle of the Cold War

3.1.1 The American-British Nuclear Hegemony

Merely seven years after the WWII, in 1952, with the appreciable American assistance, Britain was able to emerge on the global scene as a pompous nuclear-armed nation. USSR had already gone nuclear in 1949, and its weapons were more threatening to the Western Europe, than to America. Though all three nations, USA, Britain and France, were partners in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), USA and Britain collaborated, and in some cases even conspired, to prevent France from going nuclear. Any requests or demands from the French leaders for assistance in developing an atomic bomb were blatantly denied by the Americans.⁸² It created an Anglo-Saxon hegemony on the strategic arm of the NATO, which naturally irked France. It was assumed that the American and the British arsenal is sufficient to dominate the Soviets in the bipolar conflict, and there is no need for France to go nuclear.⁸³

Americans and the British certainly had their reasons for their exclusive approach towards the nuclear weapons. They were annoyed by the French overseas undertakings, and the French reluctance in granting its colonies independence. It is important to understand that, post WWII, France was reduced to the sick man of Europe. It hankered for its historical national pride and dignity, but continued to decline politically, economically, and militarily, mainly due to its desperation to hold onto its colonies.⁸⁴ Moreover, it was believed that a French deterrent would heighten arms race instability and crisis instability. Soviets would have been induced to aggrandize their arsenal due to a novel threat emerging from the Europe, along with the already

⁸¹ Garret Joseph Martin, *General De Gaulle's Cold War; Challenging American Hegemony, 1963–1968*, (New York: Berghahn Books, Oxford, (2013): 30-45.

⁸² Erin Mahan, *Kennedy, De Gaulle, and Western Europe*. 1st ed. (Washington D.C.: Palgrave Macmillan, (2002), 33-47.

⁸³ Wolf Mendl, "The Background of French Nuclear Policy," *Chatham House, The Royal Institute of International Affairs* 41, no. 1, (1965): 22-36.

⁸⁴ Hans Kohn, "United States Policy in the Cold War," *University of California Press; Advancing Knowledge Driving Change* 37, no. 218, (1959): 193-197.

present American and British threats. Also, a French deterrent could lead to further misperceptions, existential threats and a chance of an accident in a situation of crisis.⁸⁵

3.1.2 French Nostalgia and the Nuclear Pursuit

It was apparent to all that the French were nostalgic, and they yearned for their great power status, something they had enjoyed for centuries before the tragedy of WWII. Though not completely averse to the idea, but the British and the Americans were also not too enthusiastic about a nuclear-armed France dominating the international politics as a global force. It was believed that the American and the British dyad can resolve the issue of vulnerability of the West, especially Western Europe, through extended deterrence. Moreover, Americans did find a prospective French nuclear arsenal as mildly threatening, though it would have been considerably more threatening for the Soviets. They worried that it might create a mild nuclear triangle between the French, Americans, and the Soviets.⁸⁶ Americans also believed that France might not be responsible with its deterrent, would fail at nuclear signaling, and might irrationally use its weapons against USSR. Irrationality would comprise of lack of credibility, will, clear thinking and sound decision-making. A single provocative French attempt or a mildly wrong move could pull the Americans into an unwanted and strategically inconsequential nuclear conflict.⁸⁷ Analyzing these issues, it can be argued with certainty that it was a nuclear triangle that posed an appreciable threat to global peace.

The French on the other hand had a completely different mindset and set of concerns. They had little faith in American flexible response strategies. These strategies made war an option on the European soil. It was a surreal nuclear triangle where the rivalry between the USA and USSR posed the most fatal threat to the Europeans. After the WWII catastrophe, any prospects of war, even a conventional one, were revolting to the French.⁸⁸ They were physically and psychologically exhausted, and believed that maximum deterrence or a state of Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD) should be the only options to deal with USSR.⁸⁹ French believed that a French nuclear arsenal would strengthen the nuclear deterrence by creating a strategic

⁸⁵ Kohn, United States Policy, 193-197.

⁸⁶ Baum, Two's Company, Three's a Crowd, 315-328.

⁸⁷ Francis J. Gavin, "Same as It Ever Was: Nuclear Alarmism, Proliferation, and the Cold War," *The MIT Press* 34, no. 3, 7-37.

⁸⁸ Richard Ned Lebow and Janice Gross Stein, "Deterrence and the Cold War," *Political Science Quarterly, Oxford University Press* 110, no. 2, (1994): 157-181.

⁸⁹ Robert J. Lieber, "The French Nuclear Force: A Strategic and Political Evaluation," *Oxford Journals, Oxford University Press* 42, no. 3, (1966): 421-431.

partnership between the Europeans and the Americans, a development that can suffice to perturb the Soviets.⁹⁰

Moreover, the French wanted to prevent nuclear blackmail from the Soviets. They were convinced that a limited number of countervalue force can keep the Soviets at an arm's length.⁹¹

3.1.3 Dwight D. Eisenhower and De Gaulle Discord

In the development of this triangle, the period of President Dwight D. Eisenhower in USA and the presidency of Charles De Gaulle in France, during the 1950s, were seminal. Eisenhower was especially worried that France was a crippled nation, and it lacked the capacity to handle the grand responsibility of procuring and maintaining nuclear weapons. He did not believe that a French deterrent could enhance strategic stability in an already extreme unstable environment. It could further lead to an arms race, crisis and first-strike instability - undermining the general strategic stability. In order to exercise deterrence effectively, three elements to the nuclear scenario are required: will, capability, and rationality. It was assumed by the Americans that even if France is successful at building nuclear weapons, it would still fail at all three elements, resulting in the failure of deterrence. French nuclear arsenal would also harm strategic stability, due to an added threat to the Soviets close to their borders.⁹²

3.1.4 De Gaulle's Aspirations

During his initial months in power, De Gaulle was seriously perturbed by the 1958 amendments to the Atomic Energy Act. The amendments further strengthened American and British strategic partnership. De Gaulle was now resolute that France would have to conduct its foreign policy and strategic endeavors independent of NATO. France became completely committed to the notion of *Force de Frappe* (national strike force), and De Gaulle pledged that it will not let the subordinate status of the French to the Anglo-Saxons persist. It was a Gaullist theory that a minimum nuclear arsenal is sufficient and can exercise effective deterrence on an adversary, due to the potential damage that can be caused by even a small nuclear force. Thus,

⁹⁰ Wilfrid L. Kohl, "The French Nuclear Deterrent," *The Academy of Political Science* 29, no. 2, (1968): 80-94.

⁹¹ Lieber, *The French Nuclear Force*, 421-431.

⁹² Mahan, Kennedy, De Gaulle, and Western Europe, 33-47.

the French, especially De Gaulle, believed that the chance of procuring and maintaining a small-scale nuclear arsenal is still desirable.⁹³

The French also believed that their nuclear deterrent could enhance NATO's general deterrence, as the Soviets will be deterred from seriously provoking Western Europe and attracting the Americans to a nuclear conflagration.⁹⁴

However, the factor that made the French most insecure was the development of long-range missiles, especially Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles (ICBM), by USSR, in 1958. This development made the American extended deterrence to the Europe extremely dubious, and created a novel need for France to have its own and exclusive defense architecture. Before, there was an understanding that if the Soviets target Western Europe, Americans will retaliate, especially insulated from a potential Soviet retaliatory strike. However, now, when the Soviets had ICBMs, it became extremely questionable that Americans will risk even a modest damage on their soil in order to defend the Western Europe.⁹⁵

De Gaulle was the most idiosyncratic and dynamic leader to ever rule France during the Cold War. He completely overhauled French national politics and international relations. His prime aim during his presidency was to make France great again. For him, multilateralism and inter-state defense alliances were nothing but fascinating, as well as dangerous, delusions. For him, nation-state remained the cornerstone of international politics and engagements.⁹⁶

De Gaulle considered the idea of an American-Soviet strategic hegemony over the world an anathema, and believed and contended that other capable and responsible nations should not be barred from the nuclear club. He had trivial interest in the NATO as the guarantor of European defense. He was probably a little biased in this matter, as he detested American domination of the NATO, and was least interested in expending his energy and resources in strengthening the alliance.⁹⁷ De Gaulle believed that once France became nuclear, it might, in some time, be able to bring Europe under its influence and establish itself as the leader of the

⁹³ Martin, General De Gaulle's Cold War, 30-45

⁹⁴ Kohl, The French Nuclear Deterrent, 80-94.

⁹⁵ Kohl, The French Nuclear Deterrent, 80-94.

⁹⁶ Gavin, Same as It Ever Was, 7-37.

⁹⁷ Gavin, Same as It Ever Was, 7-37.

continent.⁹⁸ As France the leader of the Europe, the continent could exercise its deterrence, and minimize its dependence on the Americans. So, though in a strategic partnership, the French and the Americans were not exactly friends, making it extremely easy for the Soviets to exploit their unstable relationship. It was slowly turning into a threatening triangular relationship.

Most importantly, De Gaulle wanted the French to have a greater say in the NATO and global decision-making. The secondary status of French opinions on international strategic and political issues was unacceptable for him. He even made a long-shot attempt to convince Federal Republic of Germany (FRG - West Germany) to cooperate with him over his regional objectives. However, unsurprisingly, Germans only reaffirmed their commitment to the Atlantic alliance. Regardless, he continued to be hesitant about Atlantic and European ties, and as an alternative, he recommended that there should be limitations to the hostilities, and some form of strategic engagement between the East and the West (Americans and the Soviets) should be pursued, leading to an overall environment of strategic stability.⁹⁹

3.1.5 France Goes Nuclear

On Feb 13th, 1960, France finally detonated a plutonium device of 60-70 kilotons, and joined the exclusive nuclear club of three world nations. De Gaulle amused himself with the idea that he had eventually elevated his nation in rank and status on the global scene, and all the other nations would now have no choice but to take France seriously. France then began to work on developing effective delivery platforms for its nuclear payloads.¹⁰⁰

However, scholars and observers could not keep from wondering the whole point of this massive undertaking. Yes, France was now nuclear. However, considering the size of its arsenal, it could not really intimidate or deter USSR. Its deterrent only disturbed the Americans. French weapons were limited in numbers, and were not survivable – in other words, France did not have the capability to retaliate if the Soviets struck first.

Mutual Vulnerability or Assured Destruction with the Soviets was a far-fetched dream. Such a situation creates incentives to preempt, leading to first-strike instabilities. Apparently, France

⁹⁸ Anton W. Deporte, "De Gaulle's Europe: Playing the Russian Card," *Berghahn Books* 8, no. 4, (1989): 25-40.

⁹⁹ Lebow and Stein, *Deterrence and the Cold War*, 157-181.

¹⁰⁰ Mendl, *The Background of French Nuclear*, 22-36.

did not have the second-strike capability, and was completely vulnerable to an unexpected or unpredictable Soviet attack. It was questionable whether France could ever exercise effective deterrence, and become equipped enough to have a nuclear balance or superiority over the Soviets. It was not until 1983, that France acquired nuclear-armed submarines, the elusive platforms resilient to a first-strike, which can guarantee the victim nation's second-strike capability. So, during the 1960s, France undermined strategic stability, while also not exercising effective deterrence. It was neither here nor there.

France could only benefit from the weapons in an effective first-strike, as USSR was totally capable of disarming France, if it struck first. Even the capability of that first French strike was questionable, as French strategic bombers of Mirage IV class were fairly vulnerable. They were reliant on a hostile Eastern Europe for refueling.

French leadership had deterrence by punishment on its mind, but it could only threaten considerable damage on USSR, while USSR was capable of completely annihilating France. So, the French newly realized nuclear arsenal lacked the capacity to actually deter the Soviets. Nevertheless, it is debated that the French got a leverage by creating a nuclear triangle between themselves, Americans and the Soviets. Soviets would not have taken the French deterrent seriously in some other scenario, but the prospect of being damaged and weakened by a French strike, and then facing an all-powerful America in that state was unnerving for the Soviets.¹⁰¹ This triangle seriously impaired the potential strategic stability the Americans were striving for, and led everyone only towards nuclear deterrence.

3.1.6 Emergence of the American-Soviet-French Triangle

Thus, the triangular relationship developed and evolved towards a not so auspicious direction. The 1960s was a paradoxical decade, where France oscillated between the Soviets and the Americans, and conducted a debatable foreign policy. Between 1960 to 1964, France conducted more nuclear tests than any other nuclear-armed nation, in order to make itself invincible.¹⁰² On October 7th, 1963, Kennedy signed and ratified the limited nuclear test ban treaty, which prohibited nuclear weapons tests or other nuclear explosions under water, in the atmosphere,

¹⁰¹ Lieber, *The French Nuclear Force*, 421-431.

¹⁰² David O. Bodunde, Olayinka C. Aina, and Muyima B. Afolabi, "Nuclear Proliferation and Disarmament: The Politics and Failure of Compromise," *American Intelligence Journal, National Military Intelligence Foundation* 33, no. 2, (2016): 47-53.

or in outer space. De Gaulle refused to sign the treaty and continued to conduct nuclear tests.¹⁰³ It would not be inaccurate to assume that De Gaulle's actions contributed considerably to the arms race instability, crisis instability, and first-strike instability (overall strategic stability), within the triangle.

In 1966, De Gaulle seriously undermined NATO by announcing to discontinue French participation in the integrated military arm of the Atlantic alliance. He even expelled NATO's headquarters and installations, which France had hosted since 1952. De Gaulle's decisions seriously harmed the strategic stability, its own credibility as a nuclear force, and international image of the Atlantic alliance.¹⁰⁴

3.1.7 French and the Soviets

Interestingly, De Gaulle, notwithstanding American chagrin, maintained cordial relations with USSR. He did so despite the antagonizing east-west rivalry. Throughout the Cold War, Soviets reminisced their relations with De Gaulle in a glowing rhetoric, and claimed that no leader after him could keep up his legacy. De Gaulle made a monumental visit to the Soviet Union in 1966, and bragged that he was the first leader to extend a hand of friendship to the western adversary, which could lead to a potential strategic partnership between the east and the west.¹⁰⁵ It is important to note that De Gaulle, since the very beginning, was in the favor of strategic and political engagement with USSR, as it could prevent the possibility of a surprise attack and could enhance strategic stability. However, later he tilted towards nuclear deterrence and strived for an atomic bomb. As mentioned above, France was neither here nor there.

Some scholars argue that strategic stability only occurs when there is a numerical and technological balance of nuclear payloads and delivery systems between adversaries. Viewing with the numerical lens, there was obviously no potential of assured destruction and mutual vulnerability between the French and the Soviets. However, as mentioned in the previous chapter, some scholars understand strategic stability as a global environment where relations are stable. In this way, there was still some potential for strategic stability with France in the picture of US and USSR bipolar rivalry.

¹⁰³ Bodunde, Aina and Adolabi, Nuclear Proliferation, 47-53.

¹⁰⁴ Deporte, De Gaulle's Europe, 25-40.

¹⁰⁵ Angela Stent, "Franco-Soviet Relations from De Gaulle to Mitterrand," *French Politics and Society, Berghahn Books* 7, no. 1, (1989): 14-27.

Soviets especially valued the French for three reasons:

1. Soviets were not in the favor of good French-German relations, and appreciated the fact that France served as the balancing factor against Germany in Europe
2. French, especially De Gaulle, played a major role in undermining NATO and jeopardizing its deterrence strategy
3. France had a significant communist party, which Soviets believed had the potential to further Soviet interests in the future.¹⁰⁶

USSR was especially exhilarated when De Gaulle vetoed British membership to the European Common Market, in 1963 and in 1967. The subsequent leaders did not unwaveringly adhere to De Gaulle's policies, but they still honored his principles and objectives to some extent.¹⁰⁷

The French-American-Soviet nuclear triangle became less complex in the 1970s and the 80s. French are even universally honored for paving the way for détente between the USA and the Soviet Union, in 1969. French believed in east-west cooperation since the first day, and always argued against unabated hostilities over ideologies, for an indefinite period. The triangular situation did improve with the passage of time, but, still, when the Cold War ended - within the triangle - Americans were pronounced the winners and the French, the losers.¹⁰⁸

3.1.8 End of Cold War and Subsequent Conflicts of Interest

France was always tolerant towards an east-west divide, if relations are managed, hostilities curbed, strategic stability maintained, and some form of cooperation persists. However, USA wanted an end to the Cold War with a complete and unequivocal US victory. It is also said that France feared the unification of Germany while US considered a united Germany pivotal in its international designs. Lastly, USA and France did not agree on the post-Cold War political architecture of the Europe. French wanted to free Europe, once and for all, from American domination. They believed that with the end of the Cold War, NATO had become irrelevant and obsolete. However, USA aimed to redefine the principles and charter of NATO in order to continue its Euro-Atlantic presence and influence. It is important to keep in mind that these are

¹⁰⁶ Stent, *Franco-Soviet Relations*, 14-27

¹⁰⁷ Stent, *Franco-Soviet Relations*, 14-27

¹⁰⁸ Frederick Bozo, "'Winners' and 'Losers': France, the United States, and the End of the Cold War," *Diplomatic History*, *Oxford University Press* 33, no. 5, (2009): 927-956.

just speculations, and no one can declare with an unambiguous certainty which NATO nations emerged as the winners in the outcome of the Cold War. Nevertheless, it demonstrates, that when the triangle had disappeared, Americans and the French did not completely reconcile their regional goals and global objectives. France has the same old goals: independence, elevated global rank and status, European leadership, effective deterrence, and minimum American interference in the European affairs.¹⁰⁹

However, a single fact can be argued with complete certainty; post-Cold War, the theory of deterrence and the concept of strategic stability became less relevant and controversial for a few years¹¹⁰ Ironically, the French eventually signed the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT), in 1996, and ratified it in 1998.

Conclusion

The example of Cold War demonstrates explicitly that when there are nuclear-armed nations with overlapping rivalries and alliances, triangular relationships can emerge. Soviet-American-French triangle was a complex one, especially during the first three decades of the Cold War. The triangle undermined the strategic stability, and created pre-emptive incentives, crisis instability and arms race instability. Soviet-American rivalry was already extremely intricate. So, when the France became nuclear, it created multifaceted challenges. It threatened the Soviets as the French could damage and weaken the Soviets, undermining their strength in a potential confrontation with the Americans. However, the French deterrent also threatened the Americans, as a French altercation with the Soviets could unwittingly and dangerously pull Americans in a nuclear conflagration.

French played a fluctuating and problematic role during the early Cold War. They appeased none and everyone, and also antagonized none and everyone. Though the French arsenal was not fairly survivable, and it could not achieve mutual vulnerability or assured destruction, the whole episode is extremely telling for the observers that regardless of how antagonistic, a bipolar rivalry can still be somewhat straightforward. However, a triangular relationship with a nuclear element can create complex entanglements and unpredictable challenges, which can make the whole conflict much more intractable and menacing.

¹⁰⁹ Bozo, "Winners" and "Losers, 927-956.

¹¹⁰ Bozo, "Winners" and "Losers, 927-956.

As the historical context of nuclear triangles has been thoroughly analyzed and assessed, the next chapter will address the bedrock of the study in hand: the dynamics of the China-Pak-India nuclear triangle. It is only through analyzing each event and development under which the triangular relationship has evolved can one make an assessment of how it has impacted the strategic stability in South Asia.

Chapter 4

CHINA-PAK-INDIA NUCLEAR TRIANGLE

Introduction

After a comprehensive analysis of the theory of deterrence, concept of strategic stability, and the historical precedent of USA-USSR-France nuclear triangle, it is now time to look into the dynamics of the China-Pak-India nuclear triangle. Understanding the respective triangle and its impact on the South Asian strategic stability is the core purpose of this research project. This chapter will thoroughly explain and provide clarity on the historical events, geopolitical dynamics, and strategic realities that have shaped the triangle the way it is today. Only through diving into these events and dynamics, can one assess how the triangle is impacting the strategic stability in South Asia.

Of course, in order to get a full grasp on the dynamics of the strategic triangle, an understanding of the bilateral relations between each of the nations forming the triangle is imperative. Thus, the bilateral relations between India and Pakistan, China and Pakistan and China and India will be thoroughly discussed and explained before embarking on the trilateral complexities. It is important to note that purpose of this chapter is only to explain the historical geopolitical and geoeconomic evolution and the recent developments that have forged the triangle. Therefore, it will not provide an analysis on how each of the developments impact the strategic stability in South Asia.

4.1 China-Pak Bilateral

China and Pakistan have no history of political rift or an armed conflict. The two nations emerged on the global scene only two years apart; Pakistan in August 1947, and People's Republic of China (PRC), in 1949. In 1950, Pakistan was the first Muslim country to recognize PRC, and Beijing and Islamabad established diplomatic relations in 1951. For a decade, their relationship remained undetermined. However, Sino-Indian War of 1962, led to the emergence

of a common enemy, India, which provided grounds for them to establish a relationship, that resulted in decades of friendship, support and partnership.¹¹¹

It was assumed that Pakistan's membership of Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO), which was meant to contain communist regimes like China, would cause a friction between the two neighbors. However, the arms embargo imposed by Pakistan's SEATO partner, USA, during the 1965 Indo-Pak war, disenchanted Pakistan from the west. Moreover, China's initiative to give an ultimatum to India, during the same war, strengthened their relationship for the decades to come.¹¹²

A few years later, China failed to directly support Pakistan in the East Pakistan uprising in 1971. It resulted in the creation of the independent state of Bangladesh. However, China made an attempt to compensate by vetoing the admission of the state of Bangladesh to the UN Organization as a member. It is important to note, that it was the first time China used its veto power in the UN Security Council. It was, undoubtedly, a monumental moment in the historic relations of China and Pakistan.¹¹³

Since then, Pakistan and China have consistently supported each other in all the multilateral forums. It is no surprise that in the UN General Assembly, ninety percent of Pakistan's votes have been same as China.¹¹⁴ The cordial relationship evolved into a deep military and strategic partnership in the later years. China played a huge hand in Pakistan's development of its nuclear deterrent against India. China was threatened with sanctions by USA for its missile and nuclear technology transfers to Pakistan in the 1990s, but China remained resilient in its support for Pakistan. Moreover, after decades of nuclear competition between China and India, Pakistan provided a fantastic opportunity for China to strategically balance against India in the South Asian Region.¹¹⁵

Since then, Sino-Pak relations have expanded from the strategic and military domain to the economic realm. In 2006, while addressing the Pak-China Business Forum, President Pervez

¹¹¹ Riaz Mohammad Khan, "Pakistan-China Relations: An Overview," *Sixty Years of Pakistan-China Relations-Pakistan Institute of International Affairs* 64, no. 4, (2010): 11-28.

¹¹² Atul Kumar, "China-Pakistan Economic Relation," IPCS Special Report 30, Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies, (2006).

¹¹³ Kumar, Pakistan-China Relations

¹¹⁴ Muhammad Faisal, "Pakistan-China Relations," *Strategic Studies, Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad* 40, no. 2, (2020): 23-44.

¹¹⁵ Fazal-ur-Rahman, "Pakistan's Relations With China," *Strategic Studies, Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad* 19/20, (1998): 55-89.

Musharraf of Pakistan stylistically described Pak-China relationship as “deeper than the ocean and higher than the mountain.”¹¹⁶

The popular dictum that is often used in reference to Pak-China relations is: ‘all-weather friendship or all-weather strategic partnership.’ A major source of strength to this relationship has always been the mutual trust that has perpetuated between the leadership and public of the two nations, since 1962.¹¹⁷

Now, China has emerged as the world’s second largest economy with considerable global influence on political and economic issues. It has established mutually interdependent economic relations with India and USA, which might prevent a war between them in the near future. However, its commitment to Pakistan’s economic prosperity and territorial integrity has remained constant.¹¹⁸

Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, Beijing’s principal ambition has been economic growth and development. It aims to create a global network of trade routes, energy supply and communication, which led to the emergence of its one of the grandest designs and projects: One Belt One Road Initiative (OBOR). Pakistan, being China’s western neighbor, and also being ideally located at the center of South Asia, Central Asia and West Asia, as well as at the mouth of the Persian Gulf, makes it the key player in the implementation of OBOR. Thus, China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), the flagship project of Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), came as no surprise to the international community. CPEC is a framework of regional connectivity that envisions multiple infrastructural, energy and economic development projects in Pakistan. Its defining aspect is to give China access to the Gwadar port, which would play a key role in connecting it to the rest of the world. As Pakistan has also shifted its aim from military advancement to economic development, Sino-Pak relations have touched new heights of symbiosis.¹¹⁹

However, stable relations between India and Pakistan, social stability in Afghanistan, and secure environment for the Chinese workforce in Pakistan would be indispensable for the effective implementation of the CPEC project. Indeed, Beijing and Islamabad have cooperated

¹¹⁶ Kumar, Pakistan-China Relations

¹¹⁷ Dr. Moonis Ahmar, "Dynamics of Pakistan-China Relations," *Journal of Security and Strategic Studies, Strategic Vision Institute* 6, no. 1, (2019): 32-48.

¹¹⁸ Ahmar, Dynamics of Pakistan-China Relations, 32-48.

¹¹⁹ Faisal, Pakistan-China Relations, 23-44.

vigorously to attain and ensure peace and security in Afghanistan. Chinese leadership has even protested Indian membership to the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG), arguing that Pakistan should be treated with the same exceptionality. It is important to note that countries, that have not signed the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), are not welcomed as members to the group. Both Indian and Pakistan are non-signatories to the NPT.¹²⁰

All-weather partnership with China is the foundation of Pakistan's foreign policy. Moreover, China also sees Pakistan as a key player in its global economic initiatives as well as a strong balancing factor against threats like India and USA. The two nations have enjoyed decades of friendship and cooperation over major geopolitical issues. Former Chinese Foreign Minister Li Zhoxing once told his Pakistani counterpart that "the only country with which we describe our relationship as all-weather friendship" is Pakistan. Their friendship has thrived with the full consensus of their publics. There is absence of an occasion of a genuine friction between the two of them. Even with a futuristic point of view, the sources of convergence remain much concrete than the sources of divergence.¹²¹

4.2 Indo-China Bilateral

China and India, the two neighbors in the Asian continent, have a history of civilizational, cultural and trade relations, especially in the pre-colonial era. It is no secret that Buddhism travelled from India to China, and became the dominant religion in the latter. The fact demonstrates that the relations were not limited to exchange of commodities, but also the exchange of values. Moreover, their relations can be conveniently placed in the historical context of the region, as the Grand Silk Road connected India and China, and them with other regional, and non-regional states.¹²²

However, since the emergence of the two empires on the global scene as nation states, there relations have only been partially cordial. The relationship has remained complex, swinging between cooperation and competition. The two nations signed the 'Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence', in 1954, which was considered an optimistic moment in their longstanding

¹²⁰ Faisal, *Pakistan-China Relations*, 23-44.

¹²¹ Ghulam Ali, "China-Pakistan Relations: A Historical Analysis," Oxford University Press (2018)

¹²² Abanti Bhattacharya, "Review: India-China Relations," *India Quarterly, Sage Publication, INC* 75, no. 2, (2019): 262-268.

relationship. However, merely eight years later, in 1962, the militaries of the two nations were embroiled in a border conflict.¹²³

The armed conflict emerged from a border dispute over the regions of Aksai Chin, which is administered by China as part of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, and Tibet Autonomous Region claimed by India as part of the union territory of Ladakh, which falls under Indian administration. It is important to note that India and China have a 2100-mile disputed border, which is not something that could be taken lightly. A major outcome of the conflict was the Line of Actual Control (LAC), which demarcates the border in reference to not who should control the regions, but who actually controls the regions.¹²⁴

The Indian grant of refuge to Dalai Lama, a spiritual leader from the disputed territory of Tibet, in 1959, was a special irritant for China. The Sino-Indian war marked a low point in their relations, but the restraint of the two nations from engaging in an armed conflict, since 1962 till 2024, with the exception of the Ladakh episodes, in 2020 and 2022, has been encouraging to the observers and the international community.¹²⁵

China's nuclear tests in 1962, and the Indian likewise response in 1974, marked a defining moment in their relationship. It took their competition to a strategic level. It undoubtedly enhanced the security dilemmas and threat perceptions on both sides. However, the dilemmas and perceptions are unequivocally rooted in their unresolved border dispute, since 1949.¹²⁶

Regardless, since China's emergence as the global economic center, the economic interdependency between the two nations has augmented. Again, it is considered auspicious by the global community, as liberal values make a case that economic interdependency prevents wars. Moreover, both India and China have emerged as the developing nations with incredible economic growth and military and technological advancement.¹²⁷ However, being the weaker power in relation to China, there are still a few irritants for India. Firstly, the trade deficit India

¹²³ Ali, China Pakistan Relations.

¹²⁴ Pankaj Dodh, "Emerging Dynamics In China-India Relation," *World Affairs: The Journal of International Issues, Kapur Surya Foundation* 25, no., (2022): 26-45.

¹²⁵ Chietigi Bajpayee, "China-India: Regional Dimensions of the Bilateral Relationship," *Strategic Studies Quarterly, Air University Press* 9, no. 4, (2016): 108-145.

¹²⁶ B.M. Jain, "India-China Relations: New Directions," *Indian Journal of Asian Affairs, Manju Jain* 2, no. 1, (1989): 1-15.

¹²⁷ C.V. Ranganathan, "India China Relations: Problems and Perspectives," *World Affairs: The Journal of International Issues, Kapur Surya Foundation* 2, no. 2, (1998): 104-120.

has incurred in its economic relations with China has been unnerving. Secondly, China's all-weather partnership with Pakistan has especially dismayed India. Most prominently, China's silence during the Kargil war, 1999, and its infrastructural and development projects in the disputed regions of Gilgit/Baltistan and Kashmir have especially troubled the Indian leadership. Lastly, India fears that China's growth and power might resolve their longstanding border conflicts on Chinese terms.¹²⁸

Moreover, there is increasing competition between the two nations in the maritime domain, as both are extremely close to exercising an effective and insulated strategic second-strike capability. They are expanding their naval infrastructure and influence too. Both share some key naval routes for some indispensable trade, and control of those routes by one can cause existential threats to the other. India is especially vulnerable if such a situation arises. The Indian and Chinese military skirmishes along the Line of Actual Control (LAC), in the Ladakh region, in 2020 and 2022, served as the cherry on top in their relationship, which has been practically cooperative in some moments, but definitely competitive most of the time. Regardless of the multiple disengagement agreements since 2020, both sides have hardened their military foothold and defence infrastructure, along the LAC. US has served as an additional factor that has worsened their territorial, maritime and strategic competition. However, the US factor will be addressed later in this section.¹²⁹

Indian scholars and policy makers often resort to the historical civilizational rhetoric, in a fruitless attempt to convince China to reconcile its differences with India on the table. It is not surprising, as India, notwithstanding its economic growth and advancement in its defence infrastructure, is still weak in relation to China.¹³⁰ However, which direction the relationship takes depends on the evolving global order. If China emerges as the super power in a unipolar world, other nations might be left with no choice but to settle their disputes with China on its own terms. However, if US decline leads to a multipolar world, the security dilemma between China and India might continue. Lastly, there is no call for being completely pessimistic, as their peaceful coexistence for decades might lead to a peaceful reconciliation, something, which only seems viable in the absence of US influence.

¹²⁸ Kanti Bajpayi, "*Routledge Handbook of China-India Relations*," 0th ed. (London: Routledge, (2022), 15-25.

¹²⁹ Nalin Surie, "India-China Relations: Current State and Future Direction," *Indian Foreign Affairs Journal, Prints Publications Pvt Ltd.* 7, no. 1, (2012): 86-92.

¹³⁰ Surie, *India-China Relations*, 86-92.

4.3 Indo-Pak Bilateral

Since the partition of the subcontinent, and the birth of the nations of India and Pakistan, the two neighbors have remained inhospitable and, in some cases, outright hostile to each other. Apart from other sources of contention, the issue of Kashmir has kept the two adversaries at loggerheads with each other. The two nations have fought four wars and experienced multiple crises, since 1947. When Maharaja Hari Singh, joined India, regardless of the sentiments of Muslim majority in Kashmir, it resulted in widespread protests, which eventually produced an uprising. Kashmiris, in their struggle for freedom, were assisted by Pakistani tribesmen, and soon it turned into a small-scale war between India and Pakistan, in May, 1948. The situation deescalated though UN intervention. However, the stage was set for a decades' long rivalry, that eventually turned nuclear.¹³¹

In 1965, the potential Indian weakness through the defeat in its war with China in 1962, and the military hardware supply Pakistan had received from the west as a Cold War ally, enticed Pakistan to assist Kashmiris in their struggle against India. It soon turned into an armed struggle, as the Indian forces made an incursion into the Pakistani territory. Pakistan was saved through the vigor of its military forces and the intervention of the international community. The most disconcerting war for Pakistan, which still makes the Pakistani leadership and people nostalgic and resentful, took place in 1971, which resulted in Pakistan's loss of its eastern wing, and birth of the nation of Bangladesh.¹³²

In 1974, while Pakistan had not completely moved on from the 1971 fiasco, India detonated a nuclear device in the state of Rajasthan, ostensibly for peaceful purposes. Thus, India became a nuclear-armed nation. It created extreme strategic anxiety in Pakistan, and unsurprisingly, in 1998, both India and Pakistan became overtly nuclear. The nuclear factor is the worst element that can and could be added to an adversarial relationship. It leads to an unabated chain of action and reaction, heightened anxieties and extreme nuclear deterrence. While the international community was still readjusting to the fact of a nuclear subcontinent, India and Pakistan were embroiled into the Kargil Conflict, from May to July, 1999. As predicted, nothing of substance was achieved with that war, and it soon de-escalated with the intervention

¹³¹ Muhammad Malik, "Pakistan-India Relations," *Strategic Studies, Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad* 39, no. 1, (2018): 59-76.

¹³² Robert Wirsing, "Special Assessment: India-Pakistan Relations: Breaking with the Past?" *Asia's Bilateral Relation, Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies*, (2004).

of USA. However, it is not usually ignored or forgotten that the conflict turned into ashes the diplomatic milestones of early 1999's, especially the monumental visit of Indian Prime Minister, Atal Behari Vajpayee, to Lahore, in February, 1999.¹³³

Notwithstanding their expanding nuclear capacity, India and Pakistan have experienced a myriad of crises since 1998. However, a major war has not occurred. There were the terrorist attacks on the Indian Parliament - leading to Operation Parakram from 2001-2002 - Mumbai terrorist attacks in 2008, Uri attacks in 2016 leading to a crisis, which apparently resulted in the so-called incursion of the Indian military across 1 KM into Pakistani territory. Lastly, and not too far in the past, there were the Pulwama crises, in which, India claimed to make surgical air-strikes in the Balakot city of Pakistan – a claim vehemently denied by the Pakistani leadership and military.¹³⁴

There has been paucity of initiatives towards peace, and all proved to be unfruitful. Even South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) has not been able to achieve anything of substance, due to the Indo-Pak rivalry. Indo-Pak economic cooperation has remained negligible, though there is a lot to achieve in that domain. Due to the trust deficit on both sides, they are wary of the possibility of having any sort of economic dependence on each other.¹³⁵

Indian nation has still not been able to make peace with the fact that the subcontinent was partitioned. Kapur Surya Foundation, in one of their significant articles, made the case that due to the peaceful and engaging relations enjoyed by the Muslim Sufis and the Hindu yogis in the past, there were never any hostilities between the two communities, and, thus, there was never any need for the partition of the subcontinent. These authors and leaders completely ignore the fact that many states broke up during the nineteenth and the twentieth century, and should be able to accept the fact that it is better to have two nations than one, where there is potential for communal or religious violence.¹³⁶

However, there is also no dearth of literature on both sides citing the few peace initiatives, processes and milestones of the past, and making the case for the potential of peace between

¹³³ Sameer Lalwani and Hannah Haegeland, "Anatomy of Crises, Explaining Crisis Onset in India-Pakistan Relations," *Investigating Crises: South Asia's Lessons, Evolving Dynamics, and Trajectories*, The Stimson Center, (2021): 1-35.

¹³⁴ "India, Pakistan, and the Pulwama Crisis." *Insight: Congressional Research Service*, (2019): 1-5.

¹³⁵ Wirsing, *Special Assessment*

¹³⁶ Pankaj Dodh, "India-Pakistan Relations," *World Affairs: The Journal of International Issues*, Kapur Surya Foundation 21, no. 4, no. 110-125 (2017).

India and Pakistan, and urging for the initiatives to realize it. Some even went to the extent of arguing that both sides have not shown restraint, since 1998, because of the nuclear threat perception; source of restraint is actually the rational understanding of both the nations that peace should not be completely eliminated as an option. However, the argument sounds unreasonable, as India and Pakistan did, in fact, fought three wars before going nuclear. If history is any witness, Indo-Pak peace processes have always failed and are followed by even a worse crisis. Thus, the idea of peace in the present seems like both an illusion and a delusion.¹³⁷

4.4 The Triangle

A triangle in international relations refers to a relationship dynamic between three nations, which connects them in such overlapping ties, that a change in the relationship of the two significantly impacts the third.¹³⁸ Since the nuclear revolution of the mid-twentieth century, prominent triangles that have emerged on the international scene are mostly strategic in nature. The Cold War triangle of US-China-USSR is still regarded as ‘The Great Triangle’. It indeed represented a quintessential overlap of nuclear-based relations, comprising of nuclear signaling and force posturing, that resulted in a strategic triangle. Even today, there are multiple instances of intertwined relations between nations that can be categorized as strategic triangles. India-US-China triangle and US-Israel-Arab States triangle are two major examples. Sometimes, triangular relationships can expand to consume another significant actor which can transform the triangle into a quadrilateral relationship. The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD), commonly known as the Quad, emerged from the strategic cooperation between the four nations: India, USA, Japan and Australia. It is a major example in the 21st century of a quadrilateral relationship.¹³⁹

The focus of this study is Indo-China-Pak strategic triangle. Within a triangle, the geopolitical dictates of managing relations with one party guides the foreign policy towards the other party. In such a situation, it becomes difficult to conduct foreign policy autonomously with one without affecting the other. Therefore, just by the nomenclature, it is not that hard to realize

¹³⁷ Fahad Ahmed Misson, "Pakistan-India Relations: A Critical Appraisal of Power Politics," *Strategic Studies, Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad* 42, no. 2, (2023): 54-71.

¹³⁸ Ananya Chatterjee, "India-China-United States: The Post-Cold War Evolution of a Strategic Triangle," *Political Perspectives, University of Reading* 5, no. 3, (2011): 74-95.

¹³⁹ T. V. Paul & Erik Underwood, "Theorizing India-US-China strategic triangle," *India Review*, 18:4, (2019): 348-367.

that relations within a triangle are extremely complex, multifaceted and sensitive to the changes in the regional or global politics.¹⁴⁰

According to Lowell Dittmer, there are three typical patterns of relationships in a strategic triangle:

1. Ménage-a-trois – relations of harmony among the three states
2. The Romantic Triangle – peace between the ‘pivot’ player and the two lower-ranking players, but long-term hostility between the two lower-ranking players
3. The Stable Marriage – Harmony between the two players, and hostility between each of them and the third¹⁴¹

The Indo-China-Pak triangle can be regarded as a stable marriage. There is amity between China and Pakistan. However, there is an enduring rivalry between India and Pakistan and a strategic competition – often coming close to a rivalry – between India and China.¹⁴²

To get a solid analytical grip on this triangle, understanding the evolution of their relationships with each other, and their relationship with the Superpower, USA, during and after the Cold War, is a prerequisite. When USA and USSR emerged from the ashes of WWII as the two Superpowers, in a bipolar international system, they found themselves locked in an intense ideological rivalry, which was strategic, political, military, technological and economic in nature. As the People’s Republic of China was established on the grounds of the Communist ideology, its relations with the Capitalist USA were naturally sour. However, China, mainly due to its size, demographics, and strategic prowess, remained a key factor in the US strategic calculus. Eventually, post Sino-Soviet rift of 1969, the diplomatic relations between USA and China took a turn. Chinese had the potential to be a balancing actor against USSR and it made cooperating with the Chinese attractive to US. The 70s and the 80s were an era of limited, but significant, cooperation between the two. However, post-Cold War, China declined in strategic significance, due to its dwindled potential to further US interests regionally or globally.¹⁴³

On the other hand, India was not a high priority country for the US, during the Cold War. It is a fact that Indian decision to not join the capitalist camp, and remain non-aligned, displeased

¹⁴⁰ Chatterjee, India-China-United States, 74-95.

¹⁴¹ Chatterjee, India-China-United States, 74-95.

¹⁴² Mohammad Samir Hussain, "India-United States Strategic Relations: China as a Factor," *Journal of Political Studies* 19, no. 2, (2012): 71-83.

¹⁴³ Chintamani Mahapatra, "India-China-Pakistan Triangle: The US Factor," *Indian Foreign Affairs Journal* 6, no. 4, (2011): 407-421.

USA considerably. However, India didn't play a key role in US geopolitical goals and strategic outlook. India reemerged in prominence as a major antagonist in the Cold War environment, when it signed a Treaty of Peace, Friendship and Cooperation, with the Soviets, in August, 1971. During the same year, in December, War of Liberation in Bangladesh marked the lowest point in Indo-US relations. US sent its Seventh Fleet into the Bay of Bengal, to undermine the Indian dominance over the trajectory of the war.¹⁴⁴

Lastly, Pakistan was also a prominent actor during the Cold War. Though it joined the US camp formally by signing Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO), in 1954 – an organization aimed at containing USSR – Pakistan still remained a low priority country in the US geopolitical outlook. It was no more obvious than in the War of 1965, between India and Pakistan, when US placed an embargo on the supply of military equipment to Pakistan. Pakistan continued to decline in strategic significance, but made a conspicuous comeback, when USSR invaded Afghanistan in December, 1979. Pakistan's strategic location in the neighborhood of Afghanistan made it a key actor for achieving US goals in the region – an absolute defeat and withdrawal of USSR from Afghanistan. US arms supply and financial aid continued to flow in till the end of the war, in February, 1979. Merely two years later, Soviet Union disintegrated, bringing an unambiguous end to the Cold War. Thus, Pakistan completely declined in value, as a potential actor, that could play a significant part in US foreign policy.¹⁴⁵

The general political nature of India, Pakistan and China remained consistent, even after the end of Cold War. Pakistan continued to unsuccessfully flirt with democracy, India remained a stable democracy, while China continued to reaffirm its orientation towards a political system dominated by a single party. There has not been a ground-breaking change in their relations with each other. However, China and India have become seriously interlocked in economic cooperation. Regardless, each of their relations with USA transformed considerably with the end of the Cold War, due to changing geopolitical dynamics and pressures.¹⁴⁶

US orientation towards India, post-Cold War, was fairly observable to the international community. However, it became genuinely undebatable, in March, 2000, when the US

¹⁴⁴ Mahapatra, India-China-Pakistan Triangle, 407-421.

¹⁴⁵ "Enhancing Strategic Stability in Southern Asia." Senior Study Group Final Report, United States Institute of Peace, (2022).

¹⁴⁶ Maj Banit Singh Negi, "The United States-China-India Relationship: An analysis of the Emergence of a Strategic Triangle" (2007): [Doctoral Dissertation, Kirori Mal College, University of Delhi, New Delhi].

President, Bill Clinton, visited India for a five-day visit, while making only a few hours halt in Pakistan. It demonstrated to Pakistan, China and the international community, that US was now clearly prioritizing India over Pakistan and other Asian states, as a potential key player for realizing its geopolitical aspirations in the region. Indeed, US foreign policy in the 90s was to isolate Pakistan. It imposed economic sanctions on Pakistan, which remained relatively rigid till 9/11, when Pakistan again assumed a strategically significant role for the US, due to its strategic depth in Afghanistan.¹⁴⁷

It is true that nuclear issue was a source of rift between India and USA – US imposed economic sanctions on India post-1998 nuclear tests. However, the sanctions were lifted in less than an year. During the Clinton Administration, US policy towards Kashmir transformed to be more favorable to India. US called for the respect of Line of Control (LOC), and encouraged the resolution of the dispute through bilateral engagement between India and Pakistan. It was a subtle message that Pakistan could not count on the international support for the resolution of the Kashmir issue. The Bush Administration took forward the Clinton policy towards India considerable steps ahead, and deemphasized the nuclear issue in its relationship with the Indian leadership.¹⁴⁸

On the other hand, the Chinese strategic significance for balancing against USSR faded away with the end of the Cold War. Due to its unprecedented economic rise, China transformed from a strategic collaborator to a potential adversary for the USA. During the Clinton Administration, the US policy towards China was to engage it economically, and support the Chinese membership in the World Trade Organization (WTO). It was assumed that China's engagement with the liberal economic values might lead to a change in its internal social and political culture. However, during the Bush administration, US approach and perspective towards China went in a different direction. China was recognized as a significant strategic competitor.¹⁴⁹

The tragic events of 9/11 resulted in some peripheral modifications in the US foreign policy. Once again, thanks to turmoil in Afghanistan, Pakistan assumed a significant position in US foreign policy goals. Pakistan was regarded as the key player in the war against terrorism and

¹⁴⁷ Chatterjee, India-China-United States, 74-95.

¹⁴⁸ Gulshan Bibi et al. "Strategic Stability on the Anvil: India-Pakistan-China Triangle," *Palarch's Journal of Archaeology of Egypt* 18, no. 10, (2021): 928-943.

¹⁴⁹ Enhancing Strategic Stability in Southern Asia, 2022.

was even designated as a major non-NATO ally, in 2004. Moreover, Indian strategic significance also rose as the Bush Administration claimed that it was not possible to win the War on Terrorism with Pakistan's help alone. China, during this period, continued to be a potential adversary. However, the need for constructive engagement with China continued to be highlighted in the US foreign policy discourse.¹⁵⁰

During the Obama administration, US leaders became disenchanted with Pakistan with regards to its potential to fight against terrorism. US policy makers have accused Pakistan of playing a double role – pretending to fight terrorism while also giving leaders of the terrorist organizations shelter and protection in Pakistan. The Operation Neptune Spear in May, 2011, that killed Osama Ben Laden, was conducted by CIA on the Pakistani soil without the consent of its leadership. Relations between Pakistan and USA hit the rock bottom at this point.¹⁵¹

On the other hand, US relations with India continued to strengthen. The Bush Administration went as far as supporting India's permanent membership in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) - a policy reaffirmed by all the succeeding US Administrations. China has been the only member of the UNSC, which has opposed the motion from the first day.¹⁵²

The biggest blow to Pakistan and China within this triangle was the Indo-US announcement of the launch of the Civil Nuclear Cooperation Initiative, in July, 2005. India has always aimed to become a chief power regionally, and a significant power globally. To achieve that status, assistance from USA and its G-8 members has always been critical. In September, 2008, members of the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) officially granted India a 'clean waiver', allowing Indians exemption from the principle that forbade nuclear trade with the states that have not signed the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT). In October, 2008, US Congress gave final consent to the agreement that allowed for nuclear cooperation, trade and engagement between US and India. Thus, US decision, taken in 1974, to not to engage in nuclear trade or cooperation with India, was finally modified in order to make India a part of the elite nuclear club. Obama Administration took this precedent a grand step ahead and

¹⁵⁰ Enhancing Strategic Stability in Southern Asia, 2022.

¹⁵¹ Mohd Aarif Rather, "Nuclear Dimensions of India-China-Pakistan Strategic Triangle," *Journal of Critical Reviews, Centre for Security Studies, School of International Studies, Central University of Gujarat* 04, 03, (2017): 302-365.

¹⁵² Ashok Kapur, "India and the South Asian Strategic Triangle," 1st ed. (New Delhi: Routledge: Taylor and Francis, (2016): 10-25.

committed to support India in its quest for the permanent membership in NSG and Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR).¹⁵³

Apart from the US relations with each of the three countries in the triangle, pre- and post-Cold War, it is also important to throw light on their individual trajectories in the global geopolitical and geoeconomic environment. With reference to these facts and analyses, it can be genuinely fathomed how this triangle came to be so complex, and evolved into a threat to the South Asian strategic stability. Since the end of the Cold War, or some say even before, China and India have continued to grow and flourish militarily, economically, and technologically.¹⁵⁴ Also, their demographics make them a force to reckon with. China is the world's most populous country, while, India is the world's second most populous country. Naturally, their international influence has also expanded, due to their rising national power. Pakistan does not have considerable economic achievements to showcase, but its military and strategic power has remained formidable. Today, all three of them are nuclear-armed, and are building up on their nuclear arsenals to reinforce their defensive and offensive capabilities.¹⁵⁵

India worries that China is pursuing its 'rightful place under the heaven'. The expression represents a millenniums old strategic philosophy which called for Chinese authority on all global affairs. China claims that its rise is going to be peaceful and will lead to greater stability in international relations – a claim strongly refuted by India and the US. Thus, Chinese pursuit to rise and US strategy to contain has led to competition, mistrust, and in some cases, even antagonism between the two of them. China has successfully enhanced its geoeconomic and geopolitical influence in Asia, and replaced US as a major trading partner to multiple Asian countries like Japan, South Korea and India. US and India fear that China might emerge as a peer competitor to US, eventually facing or replacing it as a world superpower.¹⁵⁶

India and Pakistan play a crucial role in this major power competition – they constantly act as a balancing factor to keep Sino-US intense security competition from getting out of control.

¹⁵³ Bibi, *Strategic Stability on the Anvil*, 928-943.

¹⁵⁴ Brahma Chellaney, "The India-Pakistan-China Strategic Triangle and the Role of Nuclear Weapons," Atomic Energy Commission (CEA), Security Studies Department, (2002): 13-25.

¹⁵⁵ Hussain, *India-United States Strategic Relations*, 71-83.

¹⁵⁶ Dr. Abdul Qadir Khan, "US-India Strategic Bargaining and Power Balancing in South Asia," *Journal of Professional Research in Social Sciences 1*, no., (2014): 40-50.

Thus, Indo-US nuclear deal sent shockwaves to Chinese and Pakistani leadership, as it was considered threatening for the strategic parity between Pakistan and India. The parity is crucial to keep the Indo-US duad from intimidating the Sino-Pak duad.¹⁵⁷

India, on the other hand, has been increasingly relying on its strategic partnership with the US, with the prime aim to balance against China. In 2016, US officially recognized India as a ‘major defence partner’. In 2018, India was elevated to Strategic Trade Authorization Tier 1 status, which means that India now has convenient access to multiple military and dual-use technologies in the US. Indo-US trade and defence collaboration continued to grow with multiple agreements like Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA), Communications, Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA), the Industrial Security Agreement (ISA) and Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (BECA). These agreements allow India to have logistic support from US military facilities as well as access to US geospatial intelligence.¹⁵⁸

Furthermore, while US trade with India was near 0 in 2008, it increased to skyrocketing \$20 billion in 2020. US, Secretary of State, Michael R. Pompeo, reaffirmed US position with regards to India while addressing the 44th Annual Meeting of the U.S.-India Business Council – “Our two democracies and a close relationship seemed inevitable, a matter of “when” not “if”. Additionally, there was an observable surge of the use of the term ‘Indo-Pacific’ in US foreign policy lexicon, compared to ‘Asia-Pacific’ - suggesting Indian currency in the current US strategic outlook.¹⁵⁹

There are myriad geopolitical concerns that keep India and USA tied to each other. Both share similar values, want to fight against nuclear proliferation and state-sponsored terrorism, spread democracy globally and are concerned with the security of energy and Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs). It is no secret that there are some points of divergences in Indo-US bilateral interactions. US annual trade deficit, Indian trade with Iran, Indian purchase of S-400

¹⁵⁷ Dr. Zulfiqar Khan. “Strategic Conundrum of US – China and India – Pakistan: A Perspective,” *Social and Cultural Studies /Margalla Papers* 20, no. 1, (2015): 37-48.

¹⁵⁸ Salman Bashir, “The China–India–Pakistan Nuclear Triangle: Consequential Choices for Asian Security,” *Journal for Peace and Nuclear Disarmament* 5, no.2, (2022): 336-349, DOI: 10.1080/25751654.2022.2141053.

¹⁵⁹ Harsh V. Pant, “The US-India-China ‘Strategic triangle’: theoretical, historical and contemporary dimensions”, *India Review* 18, no. 4, (2019): 343-347, DOI: 10.1080/14736489.2019.1662192

from Russia are a few instances. However, it is important to note that most issues emerge from US competition or enmity with a third party.¹⁶⁰

Moreover, multiple Indian defence technologies are Russian-based, due to the ties going back to the Cold War between the two countries. India terminating its defence cooperation with Moscow can lead to Russia diverting its strategic interest towards Pakistan – a prospect that sends chills down the Indian leadership’s spines. Thus, it is logical for New Delhi to maintain a balance, and continue to engage constructively with Russia and China. Many scholars have made the observation that while India has no choice but to reinforce its defence cooperation with USA – if it wants the status of a major power in the global geopolitics – but, India will also try to maintain some semblance of strategic autonomy, something it has always safeguarded as sacred and essential to its national pride. Therefore, it can be logically argued that both India and the USA need each other. All the points of divergence notwithstanding, the points of convergence are much stronger. The Indo-US defence cooperation will continue to grow and expand in the near future.¹⁶¹

On the other hand, Sino-US bilateral relations are plagued with multiple points of divergences. Few instances are US trade deficit, Chinese dubious currency valuation, Chinese relations with rogue and anti-US nations in Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East, Chinese assistance to North Korean and Iran’s nuclear programs, its growing military and economic prowess, its growing leverage over the Taiwan strait and the its domestic and sociopolitical issues like, lack of democracy, human rights violations, and excessive media and social media censorship.¹⁶²

Thus, Sino-US discord is amplifying with each passing year. US now perceives China as a primary threat to its global clout and hegemony. Biden Administration has embraced a strategy which revolves around building an alliance of maritime democracies to contain China. Biden Administration is even trying to extend NATO’s role to contain China, designating US relations with China as a ‘systemic rivalry’.¹⁶³

China and India’s growing economic ties did generate some optimism about the future prospects of harmony and stability in their bilateral relationship. China’s policy towards India has been to benefit from its massive market and deal with it with ‘strategic patience’. However,

¹⁶⁰ Negi, The United States-China-India Relationship

¹⁶¹ Pant, The US-India-China ‘Strategic triangle’, 343-347.

¹⁶² Khan, US-India Strategic Bargaining and Power Balancing, 40-50.

¹⁶³ Bashir, The China-India-Pakistan Nuclear Triangle, 336-349.

India's growing romance with the US has disillusioned the Chinese leadership. Thus, there is severe competition between India and China now, but it cannot be regarded as a downright rivalry. China was especially unnerved by India's participation in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD), consisting of US, Japan, India and Australia, and the AUKUS, a trilateral alliance between Australia, United Kingdom and the United States.¹⁶⁴

Though the Quad members never alluded to the Chinese issue in their first meeting after years, in September, 2021, Quad is internationally perceived as an anti-Chinese alliance, focused on strengthening defence ties between its members. AUKUS members also announced in September, 2021, their concrete plans to assist Australia with its nuclear-powered submarine program. Once again, the alliance is perceived as a medium for containing China in the region.¹⁶⁵

The current Chinese political culture is not conducive to bloc politics and alliance systems. Though, China and Pakistan are considered 'iron brothers', they are not bounded with each other in a formal military alliance. China's prime strategic objective is enhancing its global reach, influence and power through 'development'. Thus, out of this mindset, the idea of Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) emerged. BRI is inspired from the historic 'Silk Road', connecting multiple regions in Asia and Europe. BRI will not only connect China with Central Asia, the Europe, Southeastern, South and North Asia for trade and economic purposes, but it will also enhance Chinese national security through expanding its defence architecture. Thus, BRI is the pillar of Chinese master plan in the world. The project also massively enhances Pakistan's strategic, geopolitical and geoeconomic significance, as CPEC is the flagship project of BRI.¹⁶⁶ Moreover, China's 'string of pearls' policy got momentum in 2005. Since then, China has worked to encircle India. It has recently forged significant development and strategic partnerships in the Indian neighborhood, most prominently with Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Nepal and Maldives.¹⁶⁷

Development has been the core objective of Indian and Chinese leadership – a fact – which has made them considerably dependent on each other. Since India launched economic liberalization

¹⁶⁴ S. Paul Kapur, *India's Relationships with the United States and China: Thinking Through the Strategic Triangle*. The New Great Game: China and South and Central Asia in the Era of Reform, edited by Thomas Fingar, Redwood City: Stanford University Press, (2016): 41-68.

¹⁶⁵ Kapur, *India's Relationships with the United States*, 41-68.

¹⁶⁶ Khan, *Strategic Conundrum of US*, 37-48.

¹⁶⁷ Khan, *US-India Strategic Bargaining and Power Balancing*, 40-50.

program, in 1991, economic agreements and ministerial visits between the two countries have increased multifold. Thus, economic interdependency works as a Confidence Building Measure (CBM) between the two countries. Therefore, the two entering in a threatening military alliance against each other seems like a remote idea.¹⁶⁸

Bilateral trade between India and China soared to a record \$136.2 billion in 2023, marking a 1.5% year-on-year increase. Even USA recognizes the importance of the two countries due to the massive markets they offer. Nevertheless, a downward trajectory has been observed in their relations by the scholars and policymakers, alike. The remote possibility of a two-front threat from China and Pakistan has kept the Indian leadership on its toes. India is especially disconcerted by Chinese arms build-up. Chinese long-range missiles can now reach the continental US. Moreover, China tested a nuclear hypersonic missile in August, 2021. China has also refused to engage in a dialogue with the west over nuclear weapons, and has ignored NATO's suggestion towards arms control initiatives. On top of that, the Ladakh episode and growing Indo-US romance have raised special concerns regarding the future of Indo-China bilateral relations.¹⁶⁹

Regardless, the most threatening element of the Indo-China-Pak triangle is the enduring rivalry between India and Pakistan. It is even more threatening for South Asia compared to Indo-China competition. The two of them are nuclear-armed and have threatening nuclear doctrines. Pakistan introduced tactical nuclear weapons in order to nullify India's infamous Cold Start Doctrine (CSD). The CSD called for the Indian leadership to consider minor incursions into the Pakistani territory as an option, in a potential response to an allegedly Pakistani-sponsored terrorist attack. Since the advent of the tactical nuclear weapons, Pakistan officially exercises 'Full Spectrum Deterrence' at minimum credible levels.¹⁷⁰

India on the other hand has declared a so-called No First Use (NFU) policy. However, it comes with multiple caveats. Indian military can use nuclear weapons as a response to the use of chemical or biological weapons against it. Moreover, India can also respond with nuclear weapons in response to the use of nuclear weapons against its forces on another country's

¹⁶⁸ Kapur, *India and the South Asian Strategic*, 10-25.

¹⁶⁹ Bashir, *The China-India-Pakistan Nuclear Triangle*, 336-349.

¹⁷⁰ Rather, *Nuclear Dimensions of India-China*, 302-365.

territory. Thus, Indian policy makers have ensured a lot of room to maneuver under the umbrella of the NFU policy.¹⁷¹

In 2020, India was the third largest military spender, only after US and China. It spent \$72.9 billion on its arms build-up. In 2021, India demonstrated a Multiple Independently-Targetable Reentry Vehicles (MIRVs) capability, by launching its Agni-5 missile. It has also achieved milestones in establishing a ballistic missile defence (BMD) system. The S-400 Triumph air-defence system units supplied by Russia are regarded as the jewel in the Indian defence architecture. Moreover, India has plans to have a flotilla of 5 to 6 nuclear submarines, the lead ship of which, INS Arihant, was launched in July, 2009. The flotilla will allow India to consolidate its second-strike capability against Pakistan. Moreover, India has a reputable space program and has made major strides in the domain.¹⁷²

Nevertheless, international community and prominent scholars are debating a potential decline in Indian geopolitical influence. They have argued that, under the Modi government, India has become hyper nationalistic. Indian polity is taking a shift from democracy towards autocracy, which has created internal problems like insurgencies, inequalities and institutional discrimination. These internal problems might get in the way of development and rising Indian clout in the global affairs. Moreover, India has become too complacent in its hegemonic state-of-mind, and has shown a lack of interest in the well-being of the neighboring states. Lack of support in the neighborhood can lead to the undoing of Indian hegemonic goals.¹⁷³

Regardless, Indian military build-up has made Pakistan apprehensive. It is important to note that though India recognizes China to be its primary threat, most of its military assets are Pakistan-centric. India has hegemonic designs and its policy is to completely isolate Pakistan in the global geopolitical landscape. Indian leadership believes that Pakistan, due to its economic troubles, political instability, and turbulent neighborhood (considering problems in Afghanistan), is already on a self-destructive path. Thus, left on its own, the nation will eventually collapse.¹⁷⁴

¹⁷¹ Bashir, *The China–India–Pakistan Nuclear Triangle*, 336-349.

¹⁷² Bashir, *The China–India–Pakistan Nuclear Triangle*, 336-349.

¹⁷³ Bibi, *Strategic Stability on the Anvil*, 928-943.

¹⁷⁴ Bibi, *Strategic Stability on the Anvil*, 928-943.

Moreover, India is also pursuing escalation dominance over Pakistan. Escalation dominance refers to a state of affairs where the adversary can potentially benefit from the escalation of the conflict, while other party does not reserve similar options. Throughout the last decades, India has not been able to escalate its conflicts with Pakistan due to the nuclear threat. However, now India wants to revise the status quo, through making its defence architecture invincible and its offensive capabilities devastating for a potential rival.¹⁷⁵

Therefore, India has emerged as an existential threat to the state of Pakistan. Pakistan is smaller and conventionally much weaker in relation to India. It tries to balance against India with its strategic capability and nuclear arsenal. Its aim is to deter all forms of aggression with counterforce and countervalue nuclear threats. Nevertheless, Pakistan has impressive strategic and defence capabilities. There are multiple short and medium range nuclear capable missiles – both ballistic and cruise – in the Pakistani nuclear arsenal. Pakistan’s Shaheen 3 missile can hit targets in Indian Andaman Islands near South East Asia. Moreover, Pakistan has launched Babur-III, which is a submarine launched cruise missile (SLCM). Pakistan’s Khalid class boats are diesel-electric submarines with air independent propulsion (AIP) capability.

Thus, Pakistan Navy (PN) has taken substantial initiatives to neutralize Indian second-strike capability, which could create incentives to preempt. There is no doubt that Pakistan’s strategic capability is internationally recognized as sophisticated and outstanding. Pakistan National Command Authority (NCA) confirmed in 2017 that Pakistan has the capacity to face and respond to all levels of aggression from a potential adversary.¹⁷⁶

Recently, Indo-Pak relations have drastically worsened. Modi has capitalized on anti-Pakistani rhetoric to expand its vote bank. Indian airstrikes in the town of Balakot in February, 2019, have set a dangerous precedent for the future bilateral relations. Moreover, Indian decision to revoke the special status of Indian Illegally Occupied Jammu and Kashmir (IIOJK), in August, 2019, and subsequent gross human rights violations in the region, marked the lowest point in their bilateral relations. Since then, all diplomatic or trade relations have been indefinitely terminated. There is a severe dearth of concrete CBMs, which could maintain this rivalry at a tolerable level. The only two notable CBMs are non-attack on each other’s nuclear facilities

¹⁷⁵ Bibi, Strategic Stability on the Anvil, 928-943.

¹⁷⁶ Bashir, The China–India–Pakistan Nuclear Triangle, 336-349.

agreement, obliging them to exchange list of nuclear sites on the first day of every calendar year, and ballistic missile launch pre-notification agreement.¹⁷⁷

Pakistan has demonstrated interest in maintaining good relations with its neighbor. However, Indian transgressions, especially under Modi's leadership, have made it increasingly difficult. In these circumstances, Pakistan has given China access to Azaad Kashmir for development projects. The strategy is meant to increase Chinese stakes in any potential conflict in Kashmir. Indeed, China was seriously exasperated when Indian leadership revoked IIOJK's special status.¹⁷⁸

Moreover, Pakistan's number one goal is development. Indeed, Pakistan's National Security Policy (NSP), 2022-2026, published by the National Security Division, upheld the goal of economic growth and development, and ensuring its security through the economic, political and social security of its citizens. In this scenario, CPEC has come as a grand opportunity for the Pakistani leadership. It can lead to major infrastructure development and economic growth in the country, through providing energy security and employment opportunities. Though, the strategic significance of Pakistan has always been realized by USA, China and India, CPEC will further enhance its rank and importance for the international community.¹⁷⁹

As of now, the triangular relationship between India, China and Pakistan gets intricate by day. The three countries are nuclear armed, share borders and have historical territorial disputes. Pakistan and India are intense rivals. Nuclear threshold is low and force posturing is menacing in their bilateral relations. The propensity for vertical escalation is high on both sides and war has always remained an option. Indian airstrikes in Pakistan have set a dangerous precedent, and vertical escalation can become inescapable in a future conflict. It is threatening for the regional security that India is trying to achieve escalation dominance over Pakistan. The situation becomes extremely precarious when Modi recklessly uses expressions like 'Qatal ki Raat (night of bloodshed)' in reference to an Indian conflict with Pakistan.

On the other hand, China and India are also embroiled in a decades long dispute and grave competition over trade, SLOCs and geopolitical influence. Indo-US strategic partnership has

¹⁷⁷ Khan, Strategic Conundrum of US, 37-48.

¹⁷⁸ Khan, Strategic Conundrum of US, 37-48.

¹⁷⁹ Khan, Strategic Conundrum of US, 37-48.

further destabilized the triangle. It has brought Pakistan and China extremely close to each other and has made it indispensable for them to engage in military and technological support and assistance. It is a dangerous continental triangle, where US actions play a decisive role. The Indo-US bilateral and Indo-Pak bilateral relations have not only directed the trajectory of this triangle, but made it more and more complex and dangerous each day.¹⁸⁰

Conclusion

China and Pakistan have a spectacular history of friendship and cooperation. Since the emergence of a common enemy, they have strengthened their bilateral relations and cooperated in the domain of economics, military, and technology. On the other hand, Indo-China relations have oscillated between cooperation and competition. Though economic interdependency works as a CBM in their bilateral relations, the geopolitical differences have remained strong and imperative. Lastly, Indo-Pak relations have been plagued with an enduring rivalry, since the middle of the twentieth century, and the nature of the conflict, hostility and strategic competition has led to uninhibited arms race and threat perceptions.

Due to their overlapping bilateral interactions, their intertwined relationships have emerged as a complex and a challenging triangle for the regional security. US has played the key role in directing the course of these triangular relationships. Sino-US global competition has pushed India and Pakistan to partner with the global hegemon and the emerging competitor. Thus, the trajectory of this triangle will be directed by Indo-US strategic partnership, Sino-US competition for the global influence, and the growing Indo-Pak hostilities.

As the chapter has acquainted readers with the complete nature of the China-Pak-India nuclear triangle, the next chapter is going to achieve the final purpose of the study: assessing how the past developments, historical events, and the geopolitics in the context of the triangle, in hand, can and have affected the strategic stability in South Asia. Thus, it will not only address the current realities, but will also give a futuristic point of view on the direction the triangular relationship might take.

¹⁸⁰ Rather, *Nuclear Dimensions of India-China*, 302-365.

Chapter 5

ANALYZING THE CHINA-INDIA-PAKISTAN NUCLEAR TRIANGLE

Introduction

While the preceding chapters have created a vivid picture for the readers of how a nuclear triangle can exist, guided by the concept of strategic stability and theory of nuclear deterrence, as well as the historical context and current dynamics of the China-India-Pak nuclear triangle, this chapter will be the core of the entire research study. It will address the fundamental research question; how the China-India-Pak nuclear triangle can and is affecting the strategic stability in South Asia. In order to make such a comprehensive analysis, the entire research literature was reexamined and interviews of the leading scholars in the strategic academic circles were conducted. Therefore, the chapter will enable the readers to comprehensively grasp how the complex triangle in question is reshaping the strategic equation of South Asia.

5.1 Evolving Dynamics of Sino-US Competition and the Role of India in the Same

As discussed above, China, due to its unprecedented economic rise, transformed from a strategic collaborator to a potential adversary for the USA, in the early 21st century. China, on its part, resents US interference in global affairs and its pomposity over every aspect of international relations – especially US hegemony on international platforms. Moreover, US and Chinese international goals and political culture diverge in multiple aspects. In the prospects of fourth-generation warfare, power is determined by diverse capabilities – political, military, economic, soft, information, and most crucially, technological. US and China are undoubtedly expanding and consolidating their global power and influence, through making strides in each of these elements of the fourth-generation warfare. To the US's dismay, China has developed missiles that can reach the continental US.

During a private interview, Lecturer at the National Defence University, Islamabad, Nabeel Hussain, commented that:

“There is undoubtedly an emergence of strategic competition between the US and China. The US has enjoyed the status of global hegemon for decades and China’s

slow, but consistent rise, is serving as a challenge to the said hegemony. Thus, Chinese rise is unnerving for the US leaders.”¹⁸¹

The interesting thing to note in the said dynamic is that the US is an interventionist power, while China has reaffirmed the policy of non-intervention on multiple occasions. These conflicting policies, indeed, make the bilateral relations tense. However, Nabeel Hussain further commented, that it is a unique case of strategic competition, as while the two are at loggerheads over certain political issues, they are also deeply engaged in trade and economic relations. Thus, there is some form of mutual dependency that might serve as a stabilizer in their relations.¹⁸²

However, one cannot rely too deeply on the capacity of economic relations to work as a source of good faith. The US-China trade war, which commenced in 2018, and has persisted till now, has raised alarms over the potential of a breakdown in Sino-US relations. Nevertheless, it is important to note that China has established itself as a soft power. Its leadership has advocated for a peaceful rise in the international realm. Thus, China has demonstrated no intention of going on a hot war with the current hegemon. Despite it, China’s soft power, especially its reach to the US, has been unnerving for the US leadership. Thus, there is always the risk of recklessness or rashness from the US side, which could drastically lead to destabilization in the bilateral relations.¹⁸³

With regard to the role of India in this context, according to Nabeel Hussain, its role has been hypocritical to some extent. It is greatly enjoying the dividends produced by the Sino-US rivalry. Simultaneously, it has maintained its trade relations with China and capitalized on China’s vast markets and enormous manufacturing industry. Moreover, it closely cooperates with China in notable international organizations like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and BRICS.¹⁸⁴

Regardless, it is undoubtedly tilted towards the US, when it comes to being a direct actor in the Sino-US strategic competition. There is no doubt that the strategic dynamic has considerably

¹⁸¹ Hussain, Nabeel. (Lecturer at the National Defence University, Islamabad), in discussion with Tooba Ghaffar. May 2, 2024.

¹⁸² Hussain, Interview, May 2, 2024.

¹⁸³ Faisal, Muhammad. (PhD Candidate at University of Technology, Sydney), in discussion with Tooba Ghaffar. May 7, 2024.

¹⁸⁴ Hussain, Interview, May 2, 2024.

served Indian interests. It has led India and the US to conclude internationally crucial deals like COMCASA, BECA, and most importantly, the Indo-US nuclear deal. Thus, India is not only able to access real-time intelligence and information provided by sophisticated US surveillance technology but is also able to procure nuclear technology and material, that are otherwise denied to states non-signatory to NPT. Thus, it can be argued with certainty that Sino-US strategic competition, and Indian leadership's shrewdness and opportunist tendencies, have allowed India to reap massive benefits for the international status and national resilience it desires for its nation.¹⁸⁵

In a formal conversation over the research issue, Dr. Saif Malik, Former Director of India Study Center, ISSI, made observations that Sino-US strategic competition has been going on for some time and is expected to continue to exist, especially in the Indian Ocean Region, Pacific, and the Middle Eastern region. These key regions effectively keep the two international powers entangled with their irreconcilable and conflicting interests. Moreover, when it comes to India, it will surely serve as the US agent in the region, acting as a shield against China, and safeguarding US interests in the regions mentioned.¹⁸⁶

A senior security official from the National Security Division, who has chosen to stay anonymous, made observations that US-China strategic competition has expanded into new avenues beyond political, defense, and economic. The new avenues of competition include high-tech areas such as semiconductors, securing strategic supply chains, high-end manufacturing, AI, and others. The main reason is the achievement of self-sufficiency by China, thereby worrying the US and leading it to practice escalation of threats and dangerous military maneuvers around China.¹⁸⁷

Moreover, Dr. Tughral Yamin, former Associate Dean, CIPS, NUST, stated regarding the issue:

“India is now a strategic partner of the US, and the latter is building it up as a bulwark against the Chinese. The India/China military standoff, in May 2020, has only aggravated the situation. Chinese and Indian troops have been engaged in hand-to-hand combat along the Line of Actual Control (LAC), in the disputed Pangong Lake in Ladakh and near the border between Sikkim and Tibet.”

¹⁸⁵ Hussain, interview, May 24, 2024.

¹⁸⁶ Malik, Saif. (Former Director India Study Center, ISSI), in discussion with Tooba Ghaffar. May 4, 2024.

¹⁸⁷ Interview with a Senior Security official from the National Security Division, Islamabad, April 30, 2024.

Thus, he affirms the fact that the US and China are engaged in strategic competition and that the US is facilitating the strategic and military expansion of India, in order to manage the same.¹⁸⁸

Muhammad Faisal, PhD Candidate at the University of Technology, Sydney, further confirmed that Sino-US competition is intensifying. The competition is rooted in their aspirations for global influence, where the US wants to preserve the global order and its status as the unipolar world power, while China wants to reshape it such that it would confirm China's place in the international realm and facilitate an environment for Chinese growth. Indian role in this equation is multifold. It wants to enhance its influence in the Asia-Pacific region and deny China's influence in South Asian and the Indian Ocean Region.¹⁸⁹

Dr. Masood Khattak, Assistant Professor, Department of I.R., International Islamic University, Islamabad, opined that Asia is evolving to be the future political and economic center of the world. Thus, US interest in the region or the 'Pivot to Asia' policy came as no surprise. Problematically, for the US, China is a power to reckon with in the region. The rhetoric originating from and the developments taken under the umbrella of Chinese BRI policy have created special insecurities for the US. Moreover, the Chinese 'string of pearls' policy, aimed at encircling India, has been especially unnerving for the Indians and has pushed them into the arms of the US, even further. Thus, Indo-US cooperation is a positive sum game for both nations. After all, it increases their chances of containing the growing Chinese geopolitical and geoeconomic power, influence, and clout in the region.¹⁹⁰

Therefore, it can be asserted that there is a consensus of the leading scholars, in the domain, that the three-decade unipolarity of the US is now under a serious threat, and that US and China are embroiled in a strategic competition. In the 21st century, the primary drivers of this change are globalization, demography, and technology. Some scholars are even warming up to the prospects of a 'New Cold War' between the two leading powers in the world – alluding to a new ideological competition between Chinese authoritarianism and American liberal democratic values. India, undoubtedly, is capitalizing on this potential rivalry, through siding

¹⁸⁸ Yamin, Tughral. (Former Associate Dean, CIPS, NUST), in discussion with Tooba Ghaffar. May 5, 2024.

¹⁸⁹ Faisal, Interview, May 7, 2024.

¹⁹⁰ Khattak, Masood. (Assistant Professor, Department of I.R. International Islamic University, Islamabad), in discussion with Tooba Ghaffar. May 10, 2024.

with the US. Moreover, the said competition carries the potential to destabilize the South Asian region.

5.2 Security Concerns and Challenges for Pakistan in the Context of Indo-US Strategic Partnership

As explained in the preceding chapter, multiple steps have been taken since the beginning of the 21st century – the Indo-US nuclear deal, US recognition of India as a major defense partner, India's elevation to Strategic Trade Authorization Tier 1 status, agreements like COMCASA and BECA, strengthening of the QUAD alliance, and US arms supply to India - have effectively consolidated Indo-US strategic partnership. These developments have made Pakistan considerably vulnerable to potential Indian aggression. It is true, that Pakistan is increasingly collaborating with China to balance against the Indo-US partnership. Nevertheless, it is not easy to forget that China has never physically come to the aid of Pakistan, during a war. Further, even to cash the dividends from the CPEC project, the stabilization of Afghanistan and Gilgit-Baltistan, and the resolution of the Kashmir issue would be the key obstacles to overcome.

The senior security official, from the National Security Division, observed that the negative effects of Indo-US strategic partnership are beginning to appear on the horizon. First challenge is the increasing gap in Indian power potential vis a vis Pakistan, as a result of opening of Western markets and high-tech technology doors for India. Second challenge is the qualitative improvement in Indian missile program, which was suffering from serious technical issues. Third is the diplomatic challenge, where India's diplomatic clout has increased significantly to the point of total impunity from grave human rights violations it is conducting against minorities within its borders. Moreover, India has joined major anti-China alliances set up by the United States, giving India a major diplomatic boost.¹⁹¹

According to Nabeel Hussain, Indo-US cooperation is multifaceted. The US facilitated Indian membership to groups focused on nuclear cooperation, like the Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR) and Australia Group. The US also enhanced Indian prominence in the Group of Twenty (G20), which is the premier intergovernmental forum for international economic cooperation. Thus, Indo-US partnership is not limited to the strategic or geopolitical domain.

¹⁹¹ Interview with a senior security official

The said collaboration has brought India to the diplomatic limelight and strengthened its relations with the international strategic community.¹⁹²

It is axiomatic that Indo-US romance is creating grave security concerns for Pakistan. Indian aim primarily has always been to diplomatically isolate Pakistan. Not only is India achieving it through its growing clout in the international forums, but also through information warfare. India has a considerable presence and influence in dominant social media platforms like X (former Twitter) and Netflix. There is growth of anti-Pakistani narrative in these platforms, which have a worldwide reach.¹⁹³

The most pressing concern is the fact that India and the US are increasingly collaborating in the conventional security realm. Pakistan will have to spend massive funds to keep up with India, which can cripple its economy. If Pakistan does not keep up, it will become vulnerable to India's mushrooming military might. Unfortunately, Pakistan has not been able to benefit from CPEC, suggesting that all the initial enthusiasm and optimism was unwarranted. Thus, the Indo-US partnership is not only creating challenges for Pakistan in the security and political realm but also in the diplomatic and economic realm.¹⁹⁴

Moreover, according to Dr. Saif Malik, not only the Indo-US strategic partnership is creating alarming security concerns for Pakistan – both in the strategic and the conventional realm – but it is also undermining the CPEC project, creating a challenge for the economy of Pakistan. There are demonstrably deliberate attempts from the US and the Indian leadership to derail the execution of the project. Moreover, the growing Indian might have given it the confidence to fume the Baloch insurgency, which is a blatant attempt to weaken the Pakistani nation by destabilizing it internally.¹⁹⁵

Faisal Malik made interesting observations regarding the position of Pakistan in the context of strengthening strategic ties between India and the US:

“Even though, India maintains that its new capability acquisitions are China-centric, Pakistan on its part, doesn't subscribe to it. For Pakistan, the long-term challenge is: how to mitigate qualitative and quantitative enhancement of India's defense-industrial

¹⁹² Hussain, interview

¹⁹³ Khattak, interview

¹⁹⁴ Hussain, interview

¹⁹⁵ Malik, interview

capacity that can continue to pose a challenge, even after Indo-US strategic cooperation reduces over time. Beyond this, for Pakistan, the growing inter-operability between Indian and US militaries, and Indian access to the US intelligence and satellite data, can impact Pakistan's military readiness levels."¹⁹⁶

Therefore, it can be argued with certainty that the Indo-US strategic partnership has created security concerns and challenges for Pakistan at multiple levels. Pakistan is a small state that was already exhausting its resources to keep up with its arch-enemy in the region. As the world's superpower has decided to morally and tangibly support India in its political and military aspirations, Pakistan might be left in a state of internal instability, permanent vulnerability or a potential international crisis from, which there might be no recourse.

5.3 Impact on the Equation of Strategic Stability in South Asia

The dynamic of China-Pakistan-India nuclear triangle, as well as evolution of their political relationship throughout the history, have been discussed and explained, at length, in the preceding chapter. The triangle has emerged from the dynamic of four states comprising of conflicting bilateral pairs – India and US on the one hand and Pakistan and China on the other. The most pressing concern in the given scenario is that how this dynamic can or is impacting the equation of strategic stability in South Asia. It is no doubt a disconcerting fact that three nuclear powers exist in the same region with contiguous borders. Even more worrisome is the fact, that two of them initiated an armed conflict with another nuclear power after acquiring nuclear weapons – China against the USSR over the Ussuri River and Pakistan against India in the Kargil.

Moreover, though nuclear weapons are regarded as weapons of defense, rather than offense, these strategic arsenals, with an unprecedented capacity for destruction, create massive challenges due to the prospects of misperceptions, miscalculations, overestimations, or underestimations. NWSs historically have displayed the tendency to engage in nuclear brinkmanship, playing the bluff game, in order to create confusion and insecurities, that can push the adversary into meeting their demands. As a result, regardless of all the NFU and restraint commitments made by the NWSs, the possibility of inadvertent escalation in a crisis

¹⁹⁶ Faisal, interview

situation can never be completely eliminated, especially in the scenario where there are shared borders.

Especially, in an equation of asymmetry, with longstanding disputes or hostilities, as observed between the India/Pakistan and the China/India duads, leaders can be induced to strike first in a threatening situation, in order to deny the adversary, the benefits of a potential war. Additionally, excessive nuclear deterrence, leading to an unending arms race, creates heightened threat perceptions, where use of the nuclear weapons is at least contemplated as an option.

Fortunately, since 1998, Indians exercised restraint during all its crises with Pakistan. However, its rhetoric and military culture towards Pakistan has become unduly hostile. Indian pursuit of escalation dominance over Pakistan is especially concerning. It demonstrates that Indians aim to abandon the restraint approach for a more aggressive strategy. Regrettably, an aggressive strategy in a dyadic nuclear relationship can mushroom the possibility of vertical escalation in an armed conflict. It is understood that Pakistan has a sophisticated conventional and strategic arsenal and it retains the capacity of responding to all levels of aggression. Moreover, increasing Chinese involvement in the regions of Azad Kashmir and Gilgit Baltistan has intensified the triangular entanglements.

The most disturbing element of the India-Pakistan scenario in the region is cross-border terrorism. India, on multiple occasions, especially under the Modi administration, has envisaged and discussed the option of using limited military force against Pakistan, as a response to an alleged terrorist attack. Pakistan is not conventionally as powerful as India, and it relies on its strategic arsenal to balance against Indian conventional superiority. Thus, if India chooses to respond with force in a future scenario, the restraint exercised during the Pulwama crisis cannot always be guaranteed. Chances of vertical escalation are potent.

Indo-Chinese growing economic interdependence did create some optimism regarding the possibility of a peaceful South Asia, in terms of relations between the two. However, recent Ladakh episodes and growing Indian presence in anti-Chinese platforms like the Quad, have overshadowed this sanguine approach. Moreover, even if the chances of India and China going to a war were low, India and Pakistan have been outright hostile towards each other, for decades now. It is important to understand that any possibility of a serious war between India and

Pakistan has the potential to pull China in and also destabilize the entire region. Thus Indo-Pakistan rivalry is a grave threat to the strategic stability in the region.

Quad was founded in 2004 but remained dormant for multiple years. However, its revival in the, 2017, ASEAN Summit, demonstrated the concerns of multiple Asia-Pacific and Indo-Pacific countries towards containing China. The major concern of the QUAD members, which unsurprisingly includes India, is the BRI's potential to overturn the balance of power in favor of China in the said regions. The major ports being constructed under the BRI initiative, from Sri Lanka to the South Pacific, are enhancing Chinese maritime power and strategic influence. BRI is considered a demonstration of the Chinese string of pearls strategy, which, India believes, is aimed at encircling it. India also has reservations about the so-called, Chinese debt trap strategy, which was allegedly observed when the Chinese got rights over the Hambantota port in southern Sri Lanka, due to Sri Lanka falling back on its debts. Thus, India is partnering with the Western nations in order to curb the growing Chinese clout and influence.

India is also taking initiatives to increase its presence in the South China Sea, regardless of the fact that China has made historical claims over it. India is providing military and verbal support to the nations in dispute with China, in the South China Sea. These developments became extremely prominent when Indians offered to provide helicopters to the Philippine Coast Guard (PCG), during the rising tensions between Manila and Beijing.

Unfortunately, the US is playing an extremely negative role in this dynamic. It has fumed the Indo-Pakistan and Indo-Chinese rivalry on multiple occasions – for instance, when the Clinton administration shifted their Kashmir policy in a direction more favorable to India. With the goal of containing China in the region, the US is consistently empowering India militarily, economically, diplomatically, and strategically. The biggest blow for the regional strategic stability came as the Indo-US nuclear deal, in 2005. The deal has allowed India to make sizeable strides in the nuclear domain, creating dangerous asymmetries and putting Pakistan at serious peril. The deal has also intensified the arms race between Pakistan and India, and India and China. In an effort to balance against China, US nonchalance towards the consequences of its actions towards Pakistan's security, and the possible implications of these developments for the strategic stability in South Asia is extremely disappointing.

The mistrust between all these nations has heightened, with the Western powers and India forming one bloc, and Pakistan and China forming the other. The nuclear triangular relationship between China, India, and Pakistan becomes complicated and unsettling with each day.

In the view of Nabeel Hussain, the element of ambiguity revolving around the nuclear doctrines of the three states is certainly ominous. Pakistan has never declared its red lines for nuclear use formally, and it confidently adheres to the possibility of first use. Indian doctrine, notwithstanding a declared NFU policy, has created profound confusion by outlining possibilities of the use of nuclear weapons in response to the use of biological or chemical weapons against the Indian state. Lastly, China, though overtly supporting disarmament, being a member of NPT, simultaneously maintains that China will build up arms and reinforce its nuclear defense in accordance with the evolving threats in the 21st century. Thus, these ambiguous doctrines, in the context of the complex triangle with entanglements of friendship, competition, and outright hostility, make limited warfare with nuclear overhang an appreciable possibility in the region of South Asia.¹⁹⁷

Moreover, India blatantly asserts the space for surgical strikes on the nations of both Pakistan and China, in response to terrorist threats or attacks. However, there is much less chance of a terrorist attack originating from China. Moreover, India will immediately blame Pakistan for anything unpleasant happening on its soil, without any verification. Thus, Pakistan, in order to maintain strategic stability in South Asia, must fortify its conventional military architecture. Nuclear response, even of tactical nature, cannot be an appropriate response to a surgical strike. Moreover, the menacing doctrines and alarming policies are magnifying threat perceptions in the region. If continued, this sort of behavior can succeed in creating a climate of fog, where armed conflict might present itself as the better option. In this context, Dr. Tughral Yamin argues that Pakistan is taking all the necessary measures to maintain strategic stability, by upgrading the conventional and strategic forces.¹⁹⁸

Senior Security Official from the NSD commented regarding the triangular scenario that China develops its arsenal in relation to the US nuclear preponderance, but it unnerves Indian leadership, regardless. Indian arms build-up in response to China creates strategic anxieties in

¹⁹⁷ Hussain, interview

¹⁹⁸ Yamin, interview

Pakistan. Thus, the three nations forming the nuclear triangle are plagued with the action-reaction syndrome, inadvertently undermining the overall strategic stability in the region.¹⁹⁹

Muhammad Faisal has argued that strategic stability remains under stress due to three countries pursuing modernization of their nuclear forces. China is pursuing its nuclear development and modernization to address first- and second-strike vulnerabilities perceived by the US. Conversely, the US nuclear forces are configured to respond to both China and Russia. India, on its part, is developing its capabilities with an eye on responding to China and Pakistan. Earlier, India considered Pakistan its primary strategic adversary. As India's threat perception from China has undergone a shift, part of its nuclear capabilities are now directed at China, as well. This complicates Pakistan's calculus, which only considers India its primary strategic adversary. Pakistan has to factor in both qualitative and quantitative additions to India's nuclear forces, despite some of them being arrayed against China, as in times of crisis and war, these forces can be redirected towards Pakistan.²⁰⁰

Furthermore, the given nuclear triangle has created a perilous challenge for the strategic stability in South Asia, argued Dr. Saif Malik. Resolution of the Kashmir issue could be a tremendous hope for restrengthening the strategic stability in the region – however, that seems unlikely in the near future. Just the fact that there are three nuclear-armed nations that share borders and have overlapping relationships and territorial disputes is daunting in itself. Till these outstanding disputes, threat perceptions, inter-state competition, and hostile rhetoric continue to persist, the strategic stability in the region will remain under perpetual threat.²⁰¹

Moreover, when it comes to Indian naval modernization and its impact on the strategic stability in South Asia, the situation is quite unsettling for the regional and international community. The new US 'Indo-Pacific' strategy has expanded the triangular conflict to the maritime domain, with both geopolitical and geoeconomic implications. It should be no surprise that India is at the center of the US Indo-Pacific strategy. Moreover, India has aspirations for invincible sea control in the region.

¹⁹⁹ Interview with a senior security official

²⁰⁰ Faisal, interview

²⁰¹ Malik, interview

Muhammad Faisal commented that India's recent development of naval nuclear capabilities indicates its pursuit of a secure second-strike capability and long-range power projection ambitions. India is pursuing these interests and goals with the goal of strengthening its deterrence posture against China and also projecting power across the Indian Ocean Region. While it does not impact China's naval nuclear capabilities, it will certainly complicate strategic stability for Pakistan. Now, Pakistan has to focus on finding smart and asymmetric responses to Indian nuclear weapons at sea, that are within Pakistan's resource constraints and can provide Pakistan with the ability to field modest second-strike platforms. Until Pakistan accomplishes these imperative goals, the strategic stability in the region remains in serious peril.²⁰²

Indian naval development not only seriously undermines the strategic stability in the Indo-Pakistan equation, but it also creates novel threats for China in the region, argued Dr. Saif Malik. Indian overtures in the IOR have succeeded in placing Pakistan in a precarious situation. If only one of them has an effective second-strike capability, the other one can be left at the mercy of its rival. Moreover, the lack of second-strike capability on the other side can create previously unfathomable preemptive and first-strike incentives for India. It is true that India ostensibly asserts an NFU policy, but going back on a promise is not as taxing for the leaders as one would like to assume – especially when an opportunity to serve the national interests of the state arrives.²⁰³

In the view of Nabeel Hussain, there is no doubt left that India now has an assured second-strike capability. INS Arihant, the flagship Indian nuclear submarine, can remain submerged in the waters for approximately ninety days. Thus, it is an extremely elusive platform, and nearly impossible to destroy with a counterforce strike. Thus, beyond question, the deployment of INS Arihant has created a grave threat to Pakistan and undermined the strategic stability in the region. It is true that Pakistan has launched its Babur III missile, a submarine-launched cruise missile, which it aims to launch from its class of diesel-electric submarines. However, a diesel-electric submarine cannot compete with a nuclear submarine in terms of submersion capacity. Thus, although Pakistan has a second-strike capability, it is not assured.²⁰⁴

²⁰² Faisal, interview

²⁰³ Malik, interview

²⁰⁴ Hussain, interview

Moreover, groups like Quad are creating space for India to further advance its naval development, which simultaneously poses a threat to Pakistan and China, however, a much graver one for Pakistan. Indians and the Americans are also collaborating in the strait of Malacca. India is trying to counter the Chinese in the outer sphere of IOR. Moreover, India is trying to expand its naval influence towards the Middle Eastern region.

Naval military modernization is going to benefit India at the military front, economic front, as well as global front. India is buying, developing, and deploying multiple and diverse platforms like submarines, aircraft carriers, and frigates. These sophisticated platforms also allow India to assert greater control over the key SLOCs. It is crucial to remember that approximately four-fifths of the world's oil and gas shipments and one-third of the bulk cargoes pass through the Indian Ocean. Consequently, Indian naval modernization is disconcerting not only in terms of establishing its second-strike capability in relation to Pakistan, but it is also aimed at isolating Pakistan, putting its economy at the mercy of the Indian whims, and most unfortunately, establishing Indian hegemony over the Indian Ocean and the South Asian region.²⁰⁵

Conclusion

The literature and the comprehensive commentary on the topic by leading scholars and practitioners in the field confirm that Sino-US strategic competition is intensifying with each day, and India is at the center of US anti-Chinese policy. Benefitting from this conflict over global hegemony, India has been able to massively expand and advance its military, technological and naval prowess. These developments have created massive security concerns and strategic anxieties for Pakistan. Pakistan-China-India nuclear triangle is extremely complex and menacing. It has expanded to the naval domain and is seriously undermining the strategic stability in the region. Lastly, US goals and actions in the region have considerably exacerbated the triangular dynamic. The next chapter will serve as the conclusion to the entire study, summing up the debate, verifying the hypothesis and highlighting the key findings along with a futuristic outlook.

²⁰⁵ Yamin, interview

Chapter 6

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Introduction

The research was aimed at finding the context of the China-India-Pakistan nuclear triangle in contemporary politics, why the triangle is significant for the region, and what impact the triangle is creating on South Asian strategic stability. It was also aimed at analyzing the impact of multiple alliances in the context of the nuclear triangle under the US influence, examining and analyzing the main features of the triangle, as well as deducing the impact of the nuclear triangle on the South Asian strategic stability in contemporary politics. The research has been able to answer the pertinent questions and achieve the objectives outlined in the proposal.

6.1 Summing up the Debate

The China-India-Pakistan nuclear triangle is an inescapable reality of the 21st century, shaping contemporary international politics. The South Asian region holds a global significance and the three states forming the triangle have a global significance and presence of their own. China is an emerging power creating novel challenges for the US hegemony. China and India have had an unstable relationship, known for phases of economic cooperation, but also for prominent crises over territorial disputes. India and Pakistan are arch-enemies, and their relationship has always stayed under a nuclear cloud, as Pakistan aims to balance Indian conventional superiority with its nuclear deterrent.

It has been established that the US and China are now engaged in a global competition for power and influence; a competition that has a significant potential for turning into an outright rivalry. Thus, to balance against growing Chinese influence, the US is insulating the Indians in the region, in the military, technological, economic, space, and cyber domain. US actions are not only creating concerns for the Chinese but are creating massive insecurities for Pakistan. Thus, the triangle is becoming increasingly complex and intertwined, where bilateral relations are impossible to maintain without affecting other parties. As Pakistan, China, and India are

significant states in the region, and considering the fact that they are also nuclear-armed, the dynamics and implications of this triangle are extremely consequential for the region overall.

The prominent literature and leading scholars confirm that the triangle, under the US influence, is having an extremely negative impact on South Asian strategic stability. While there is a possibility of optimism in the case of China and India, that they might not engage in a nuclear war, recent developments like the Indo-US strategic partnership have been disconcerting for China. Moreover, they have heightened nuclear tensions between India and Pakistan. The Indo-US nuclear deal of 2005 has allowed India to expand its nuclear capability, harming the symmetry in the region. The asymmetries created by US actions might lead to pre-emptive motivations in Indian strategic thought, despite the ostensible NFU policy. Confidence created by nuclear superiority leads to nations considering preemption as an option, as they feel insulated from a prospective retaliation.

Furthermore, India has been able to achieve a credible second-strike capability against Pakistan. Once again, it might not only create preemptive motivations on the Indian side, but it can also create use-or-lose pressures for the Pakistani side. The nuclear overhang over the Indo-Pak relations is intensifying. There is intense nuclear deterrence, leading to the arms race, crisis instability, and first-strike instability. Additionally, growing Indian might is also heightening tensions between India and China, disturbing the overall political stability in the region.

Thus, it can be confidently asserted that the China-India-Pakistan nuclear triangle is seriously undermining the strategic stability in the region. It has created two dyadic relationships engaged in intense competition with each other. On the one side, there are the US and India, and on the other side, there are Pakistan and China. Any bilateral engagement in the said duads makes the other duad extremely uncomfortable - intensifying insecurities, heightening tensions, and creating misperceptions. Any semblance of stability in the Sino-Indian relations is disappearing, due to the strengthening Indo-US strategic partnership. Relations between Pakistan and China are strengthening. The scenario has made each state in the triangle anxious and perturbed, increasing the chances of misperceptions, miscalculations, misinterpretations, and impatient actions.

6.2 Verification of the Hypothesis

The hypothesis of the study, that the India-China-Pakistan nuclear triangle is undermining and damaging the strategic stability in the South Asian region has been confirmed by the research. There is consensus of the leading scholars in print and dialogue that the triangle is dangerous, and creating novel nuclear risks in the region. It is an issue of massive significance for the region that needs to be taken seriously and managed timely.

6.3 Research Findings

1. There is an emergence of strategic competition between the US and China. The US has enjoyed the status of global hegemon for decades and China's slow, but consistent rise, is serving as a challenge to the said hegemony. Thus, the Chinese rise is unnerving for the US leaders.
2. China has demonstrated no intentions of going on a hot war with the current hegemon. However, China's soft power, especially its reach to the US, has been unnerving for the US leadership. Thus, there is always the risk of recklessness or rashness from the US side, which could drastically lead to destabilization in the bilateral relations.
3. India is tilted toward the US when it comes to being a direct actor in the Sino-US strategic competition. There is no doubt that the strategic dynamic has considerably served Indian interests. It has led India and the US to conclude internationally crucial deals like COMCASA, BECA, and most importantly, the Indo-US nuclear deal. Thus, India is not only able to access real-time intelligence and information provided by sophisticated US surveillance technology but is also able to procure nuclear technology and material that are otherwise denied to states non-signatory to NPT. It can be argued with certainty that Sino-US strategic competition has allowed India to reap massive benefits for the international status and national resilience it desires for its nation.
4. India will surely serve as the US agent in the region, acting as a shield against China, and safeguarding US interests.
5. Sino-U.S. competition is intensifying. The competition is rooted in their aspirations for global influence, where the US wants to preserve the global order and its status as the unipolar world power, while China wants to reshape it such that it would confirm China's place in the international realm and facilitate an

environment for Chinese growth. Indian role in this equation is multifold. It wants to enhance its influence in the Asia-Pacific region and deny China's influence in the South Asian and Indian Ocean regions.

6. Multiple steps taken since the beginning of the 21st century – Indo-US nuclear deal, US recognition of India as a major defense partner, Indian elevation to Strategic Trade Authorization Tier 1 status, agreements like COMCASA and BECA, strengthening of the QUAD alliance, and US arms supply to India, have effectively consolidated Indo-US strategic partnership. These developments have made Pakistan considerably vulnerable to potential Indian aggression. The asymmetry between India and Pakistan in military, naval, and technological terms has expanded and might create pre-emptive incentives on the Indian side.
7. Pakistan is increasingly collaborating with China to balance against the Indo-US partnership. Nevertheless, it is not easy to forget that China has never physically come to the aid of Pakistan during a war. Further, even to cash the dividends from the CPEC project, the stabilization of Afghanistan and Gilgit-Baltistan, and the resolution of the Kashmir issue would be the key obstacles to overcome.
8. The most pressing concern is the fact that India and the US are increasingly collaborating in the conventional security realm. Pakistan will have to spend massive funds to keep up with India, which can cripple its economy. If Pakistan does not keep up, it will become vulnerable to India's mushrooming military might. Unfortunately, Pakistan has not been able to benefit from CPEC, suggesting that all the initial enthusiasm and optimism was unwarranted. Thus, the Indo-US partnership is not only creating challenges for Pakistan in the security and political realm but also in the diplomatic and economic realm.
9. Even though, India maintains that its new capability acquisitions are China-centric, Pakistan on its part, doesn't subscribe to it. For Pakistan, the long-term challenge is: how to mitigate qualitative and quantitative enhancement of India's defense-industrial capacity which can continue to pose a challenge even after Indo-US strategic cooperation reduces over time. Beyond this, for Pakistan, the growing inter-operability between Indian and US militaries, and Indian access to US intelligence and satellite data, can impact Pakistan's military readiness levels.
10. Though nuclear weapons are regarded as weapons of defense, rather than offense, these strategic arsenals, with unprecedented capacity for destruction, create

massive challenges due to the prospects of misperceptions, miscalculations, overestimations, or underestimations. NWSs historically have displayed the tendency to engage in nuclear brinkmanship, playing the bluff game in order to create confusion and insecurities, that can push the adversary into meeting their demands. As a result, regardless of all the NFU and restraint commitments made by the NWSs, the possibility of inadvertent escalation in a crisis situation can never be completely eliminated, especially in the scenario where there are shared borders.

11. In an equation of asymmetry, with longstanding disputes or hostilities, as observed between the India/Pakistan and the China/India duads, leaders can be induced to strike first in a threatening situation, in order to deny the adversary the benefits of a potential war. Additionally, excessive nuclear deterrence leading to an unending arms race creates heightened threat perceptions, where use of the nuclear weapons is at least contemplated as an option.
12. Since 1998, Indians exercised restraint during all its crises with Pakistan. However, its rhetoric and military culture towards Pakistan has become unduly hostile. Indian pursuit of escalation dominance over Pakistan is especially concerning. It demonstrates that Indians aim to abandon the restraint approach for a more aggressive strategy. Regrettably, an aggressive strategy in a dyadic nuclear relationship can mushroom the possibility of vertical escalation in an armed conflict.
13. The most disturbing element of the India-Pakistan scenario in the region is cross-border terrorism. India, on multiple occasions, especially under the Modi administration, has envisaged and discussed the option of using limited military force against Pakistan, as a response to an alleged terrorist attack. Pakistan is not as powerful as India in the conventional realm, and it relies on its strategic arsenal to balance against Indian conventional superiority. Thus, if India chooses to respond with force in a future scenario, the restraint exercised during the Pulwama crisis cannot always be guaranteed. Chances of vertical escalation are potent.
14. Indo-Chinese growing economic interdependence did create some optimism regarding the possibility of a peaceful South Asia in terms of relations between the two. However, recent Ladakh episodes and growing Indian presence in anti-Chinese platforms like the Quad, have overshadowed this sanguine approach.

- Moreover, even if the chances of India and China going to war were low, India and Pakistan have been outright hostile toward each other for decades now. It is important to understand that any possibility of a serious war between India and Pakistan has the potential to pull China in and also destabilize the entire region. Thus Indo-Pakistan rivalry is a grave threat to the strategic stability in the region.
15. China develops its arsenal in relation to the US nuclear preponderance, but it unnerves Indian leadership regardless. Indian arms build-up in response to China creates strategic anxieties in Pakistan. Thus, the three nations forming the nuclear triangle are plagued with the action-reaction syndrome, inadvertently undermining the overall strategic stability in the region.
 16. Furthermore, the given nuclear triangle has created a perilous challenge for the strategic stability in South Asia. Resolution of the Kashmir issue could be a tremendous hope for restrengthening the strategic stability in the region – however, that seems unlikely in the near future. Just the fact that there are three nuclear-armed nations that share borders and have overlapping relationships and territorial disputes is daunting in itself. Till these outstanding disputes, threat perceptions, inter-state competition and hostile rhetoric continue to persist, the strategic stability in the region will remain under a perpetual threat.
 17. When it comes to Indian naval modernization and its impact on the strategic stability in South Asia, the situation is quiet unsettling for the regional and the international community. The new US ‘Indo-Pacific’ strategy has expanded the triangular conflict to the maritime domain, with both geopolitical and geoeconomic implications. It should be no surprise that India is at the center of US Indo-Pacific strategy and it aspires for invincible sea control in the region.
 18. India’s recent development of naval nuclear capabilities indicates its pursuit of a secure second-strike capability and long-range power projection ambitions. India is pursuing these interests and goals with the goal of strengthening its deterrence posture against China, while also projecting power across Indian Ocean Region. While it does not impact China’s naval nuclear capabilities, it will certainly complicate strategic stability for Pakistan. Now Pakistan has to focus on finding smart and asymmetric responses to Indian nuclear weapons at sea, that are within Pakistan’s resource constraints and can provide Pakistan ability to field modest

second-strike platforms. Until Pakistan accomplishes these imperative goals, the strategic stability in the region remains under a serious peril.

19. There is no doubt left that India now has an assured second-strike capability. INS Arihant, the flagship Indian nuclear submarine can remain submerged in the waters for approximately ninety days. Thus, it is an extremely elusive platform, and nearly impossible to destroy with a counterforce strike. Thus, beyond question, deployment of INS Arihant has created a grave threat for Pakistan and undermined the strategic stability in the region, as well. It is true that Pakistan has launched its Babur III missile, a submarine launched cruise missile, which it aims to launch from its class of diesel-electric submarines. However, the problem is that a diesel-electric submarine cannot compete with a nuclear submarine in terms of submersion capacity. Thus, though Pakistan has a second-strike capability, it is not assured.

6.4 Futuristic Outlook

There is less probability of China going on a hot war with India. However, India is still pursuing its hegemonic designs in the region and is striving to contain China in the same. Regardless, Indians are aware that they cannot compete with China at a comprehensive level, so they might wisely and tactfully deal with China. India cannot afford to have the same approach towards China as it has towards Pakistan. Diplomatic engagements might continue at some level, and trade relations are also expected to be sustained. So, their relations are expected to oscillate between cooperation and competition, with a consistent threat of crisis and hostilities.

Indo-Pakistan relations are plagued by mistrust and distrust. Trust deficit is going to be the key element, which can be the cause of destabilization of the relations between the two. Indo-Pak relations are expected to stay under a nuclear overhang due to historical enmity, rising asymmetries, and Pakistan's conventional inferiority to India. If the seven-decade history continues to guide their future trajectory, their relations are expected to remain strained and threaten the strategic stability in South Asia.

China and Pakistan are expected to strengthen their friendship, which will continue to irk India. The US is expected to intensify its strategic partnership with India in order to balance against China. The Sino-US global competition is expected to continue to mushroom, due to the Chinese rise and the challenges it creates for the US hegemony. Thus, the Indo-US duad and

Sino-Pak duad, and the way they compete, is expected to further complicate the triangular relationship in the future and continue to undermine the strategic stability in South Asia.

Conclusion

The research was aimed at determining the impact of the China-Pakistan-India nuclear triangle on South Asian strategic stability. Through intense examination, analysis, and investigation, it can be confidently concluded that the triangle is extremely complex, consisting of intertwined, overlapping, twisted, and interdependent relationships. The US acts as a major outside actor. Therefore, the combination of friendship, competition, cooperation, and hostility that this triangle contains, is creating novel threats and challenges, and seriously undermining the strategic stability of the South Asian region – a region that holds massive global significance, influence, and presence.

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ANNEXURE 1

Interview Questions

1. How do you see the evolving dynamics of US-China competition and how would you see the role of India in this context?
2. In the context of Indo-US strategic partnership, what will be the security concerns and challenges for Pakistan?
3. How the equation of strategic stability has been affected due to the Pakistan-China-India nuclear triangle?
4. The recent military modernization of India, with specific emphasis on its naval development; how do you see its impact on the strategic stability in the region?
5. Please provide a futuristic point of view on:
 - Sino-US relations
 - Indo-China relations
 - Indo-Pak relations

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