

EVOLVING CONFLICT DYNAMICS IN A NUCLEARISED INDIAN SUB-CONTINENT: ARE THEY DYADIC ANYMORE

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“War/confrontation is seen as an exception, an extreme and an aberration in international affairs; the paradox is that it is the invention of peace which is the artificial edifice”

“Anonymous”

Abstract

The international geo-political and security environment while integrated globally, is complex, dynamic and unstable. While the geo-political power shifts have been ongoing, the rapidity of change has accelerated ever since COVID has battered and exacerbated the unstable environment. India has been a moderate power disinclined to use force or intervene in its neighbourhood. China, in contrast, has developed a more aggressive nationalism accompanied by a penchant for coercive action against its neighbours. In the last five years, and especially post COVID under President Xi, China has moved out of its customary restraint and shown undue multi-domain belligerence and haste to challenge the US and the West, for domination of international institutions, Asia especially India, and gradually establish itself as a global power. China is unlikely to undertake a negotiated compromise with India, and will remain India’s main adversary for the long term with Pakistan its ‘catspaw’.

India faces the full spectrum of security threats across domains. The ongoing India-China face-off in Eastern Ladakh remains restricted within the conventional warfare domain, but it is still one between nuclear-armed states, and the threat of escalation cannot be denied. Confrontation and deterrence have got multi-dimensional to address various facets of different domains. Deterrence requires a national strategy that integrates the kinetic and non-kinetic domains. Accordingly, India must develop strategies, plans, and operations that are tailored to the perceptions, values, and interests of specific adversaries and allies. Deterrence also must be viable as a unilateral strategy. Our military capabilities and potential must be visible and known to all as it's a pivotal ingredient of deterrence.

While common understanding dictates that nuclear weapons preclude a major war, however, the “stability-instability paradox,” allows limited war between conventional forces. South Asia plus China is home to three NWS who have an ongoing confrontationist relationship. While India's nuclear policy has stood the test of time there is talk of an urgent review of India's nuclear policy, which may not be a bad idea for creating ambiguity. It is important for India to understand that relations are no longer simply 'dyadic'. India needs to continuously assess the trends, stay ahead of the loop to dominate the confrontation and conflicts which may emerge. For that 'New India' needs to transform to a 'Future Ready' India with matching CNP.

Prelude

Anyone observing planet Earth from outer space would certainly see a pretty vision to behold. On closer examination, they would realise that they are looking at a world in intense turbulence with man fighting with himself, nature and the universe.

The International Geo-Political and Security Environment: Complex, Integrated but Dynamic and Unstable

While the geo-political power shifts have been ongoing, the rapidity of change has accelerated ever since COVID has battered and exacerbated the unstable environment. Diminishing Comprehensive National Power (CNP) coupled with protectionism and reducing power projection capabilities of the US starting the slide to a multi-polar world; emergence of aggressive and belligerent China as a global power; resurgence of Russia under President Putin; state-controlled narratives leading to signs of ultra-nationalism; authoritarian and illiberal governments like Iran, North Korea, Iran, Syria, Turkmenistan which are not necessarily aligned with the ideology and ideals of a world order established and controlled by US and her allies; emerging powers with regional aspirations like Iran, Saudi Arabia, South Africa, Nigeria, Turkey, India; fractious Europe and the European Union (EU) confused about their role in global affairs; the rise of terrorism specially of the lone wolf kind, and religious Islamic fundamentalism with a twist of occupying territory and establishing a caliphate like the Islamic State (IS); global warming and climate change disruptors; transnational Multinational Corporations (MNCs) with their agendas, drug cartels, and international crime syndicates have changed the world scape¹.

There is renewed political, ideological, economic, and military competition due to globalisation which brought many good practices and developmental growth, but is a major driver of instability and conflict. While the threat of full-scale conventional wars has gone down, correspondingly the span of conflict, its complexity, unpredictability, lethality, accuracy, reach, and manifesting into many domains have emerged. The physical and non-physical domains including the cognitive have axiomatically expanded and contracted in space and time. There are no front, rear and flanks, and there is no place to hide. Many new types of warfare have also emerged and are emerging like hybrid, cyber, information (media and social media), psychological warfare (PSYOPS), control/domination of electromagnetic spectrum (EMS), asymmetric, digital, waged either singularly or cross domains both in peace, no war

no peace, or war! The spectre of biological warfare has raised its ugly head, which could be more devastating than even nuclear war, because they can persist, propagate and spread through a population globally, as amply demonstrated by Covid².

To summarise, we are in an “era of persistent, constant engagement”. Nations have their national vision and aspirations and want to find their legitimate place amongst the comity of nations. India too aspires to be a regional and global balancing power. With a troubled neighbourhood, two active border disputes, constant Chinese interventions and disruptions within and in South Asia, collusivity between China and Pakistan, grappling rampant COVID, a weak economy, some internal dissensions; India has lots on its plate and needs to build up its strategic multi-domain deterrence capabilities especially nuclear.

Geo-Political and Strategic Perspective of the Sub Continent

Peaceful Non-aligned India: Time to Change. India has been a moderate power disinclined to use force or intervene in its neighbourhood. This is in line with our tolerance of neighbours, religions, and projecting civilisational influence through ideational power. China, in contrast, has developed a more aggressive nationalism accompanied by a penchant for coercive action against its neighbours. In the last five years, and especially post COVID under President Xi, China has moved out of its customary restraint and shown undue multi-domain (PDIME: political, diplomatic, informational, military, economic) belligerence and haste to challenge the US and the West, for domination of international institutions, Asia especially India, and gradually establish itself as a global power. China has also shown a tendency to use varying degrees of force against its adversaries, which are not being recounted (China seas and East Ladakh). China’s proclivity for coercion reflects a deep-seated and growing insecurity within its elite and the CCP. Resolution of the boundary dispute has always been a political decision for China, and she would like to keep it fermenting and using it as a pressure point against India, and keep her contained within the strategic space of South Asia. For India, it is important not to underestimate China’s

preoccupation with her vulnerability. Though China and Pakistan appear to be different, they are alike in important respects. Both are driven by a deep sense of internal fragility and ruled by elites who, lacking strong foundations, seek to build national solidarity and regime strength through adversarial relationships with other states³. China is thus unlikely to undertake a negotiated compromise with India except on a tactical basis. Indian foreign policy is already getting a re-set, that security stability will remain a cornerstone of the relationship, and cannot be separated from other domains especially trade. China will remain India's main adversary for the long term with Pakistan its 'cat's paw'. Concurrently we need to keep a close watch of our immediate neighbourhood who are increasingly being drawn into the Chinese concentric circle. With the international pivot having indeed shifted to the Indo-Pacific, and amidst the struggle for ideological and global power dominance between China and USA (Russia pitches in to queer the pitch further), South Asia has got caught up in its vortex, and relationships can no longer be seen as dyadic specially in the security and economic sphere.

How Serious is the Threat to India? India faces the full spectrum of security threats across domains - proxy, hybrid, sub-conventional or low intensity conflict (LIC), 4/5G, conventional (localised to full), CBRN including the newer domains of space, cyber, water, resources (entire gamut), especially from collusive and collaborative partners China and Pakistan, with some other neighbouring nations joining in. The strategic collusion between China and Pakistan, has brought in a whole new equation, with much more expanded assistance in multi-domain expected from China in case of an Indo-Pak war. A worrying aspect is the increasing degree of inter-operability between China and Pakistan in soft and hard power (military and non-military) spheres which is being generated. From a policy of strategic restraint, India is beginning to propagate and practice a more aggressive strategy as is evident against both Pakistan and China. The ongoing India-China face-off in Eastern Ladakh remains restricted within the conventional warfare domain, but it is still one between nuclear-armed states, and the threat of escalation cannot be denied. In its wake,

both nations have carried out a series of missile tests: China fired ballistic missiles (air and sea launched) near the Paracel and Spratly Islands numerous times in latter half of 2020, with the additional payoff to warn the US⁴, but hardly something New Delhi can ignore. Strategically few aspects are clear: threat from China is likely to persist; India needs to adopt whole of Nation security strategies, and balancing responses in a nuclear weapons environment; and Indian policymakers should be mindful of the possibilities of actual military combat, be it a limited war, or a trans-domain conflict that involves the use of advanced technologies influencing both its nuclear and conventional spheres⁵. India's military capabilities and potential especially nuclear must be visible and known to all as it's a pivotal ingredient of deterrence. All said and done, nuclear weapons remain the prima donna of deterrence.

Relevance of Deterrence

Imperative Ingredients: An analysis. The increasingly complex technological security environment, with nuclear weapons, hi-tech modern conventional weapon systems like hypersonic-weapons and low-end high impact easily available disruptive systems, which can carry out major devastation, along with the rapid mushrooming of terrorist organisations has raised questions on the current relevance, role, and impact of deterrence. Both confrontation and deterrence have themselves got multi-dimensional to address various facets of different domains.

Deterrence requires a national strategy that integrates the PDIME domains. Accordingly, India must develop strategies, plans, and operations that are tailored to the perceptions, values, and interests of specific adversaries and allies. It is enhanced through security cooperation, military integration, and interoperability with own security and intelligence agencies, allied forces, and partner nations (QUAD, BIMSTEC, BRICS). The deterrent impact of such cooperation and integration is both political and military. The political impacts are primarily derived from the effects that coalition-based responses have on adversary decision-maker's perception of India's political will: the

potentially long-lasting, harmful post-conflict political and economic effects of taking on India. Allies and partner contributions to the joint fight are significant and multi-domain, kinetic and non-kinetic. These actions contribute significantly to deterrence, force protection, and overall operational success. While military intervention of any of our strategic partners including the US is very tenuous at best, we must understand the unique potency of the US: their nuclear and armed forces contribute uniquely and fundamentally to deterrence, through their ability to threaten to impose costs and deny benefits to an adversary in an exceedingly rapid and devastating manner⁶. Deterrence also must be viable as a unilateral strategy. Our main adversaries, can and will operate with and through proxies and multiple domains, and attempt to achieve their strategic and operational goals below the threshold of armed conflict. Terrorism, proxy insurgency, information, and unconventional warfare (UC) are inherently difficult to attribute and subsequently to punish the originator, and, therefore, difficult to deter. Armed Forces do not possess the capabilities to carry out deterrence operations/deter in all domains especially non-military. Today, non-kinetic domains or instruments in particular situations can become the primary deterrent. A crucial aspect is that successful deterrence is knowledge-dependent and requires the ability to establish and secure communication access to adversaries to generate the desired decision outcomes. Our military capabilities and potential must be visible and known to all as it's a pivotal ingredient of deterrence.

Human and Psychological Dimension: Increasingly Pivotal. Most defence experts and professionals acknowledge that despite the growing influence and use of niche technologies like AI, robotics and automation, machine-human interface, the human interface will remain dominant and decisive. As long as humans are responsible for waging war, warfare will remain geo-political and the province of warriors. However, recent studies and insights into the nature of human decision-making raise questions about the very logic of deterrence. Over the past 40 years, research in behavioural economics has cast great doubt on the assumption that humans will behave rationally at times of grave crisis⁷.

We must always remember that even in democracies, elected leader(s) are the final decision-makers and arbiters.

Evolution of 'Integrated Strategic Deterrence'. China is gearing up to wage system of systems and 'systems warfare'⁸. They are emerging as leaders in niche and disruptive technology, space and satellite warfare, AI, cyber, big data, and Three Warfare's strategy⁹. Realising that to achieve global power status, they need to close the gap between deterrence concept and weapon and domain capabilities and capacities, a multi-dimensional set of military and non-military deterrence capabilities that combine to constitute the "integrated strategic deterrence" posture essential to achieve the "China Dream"¹⁰ has been evolved by China. The US, Russia, and India too have realised that strategic deterrence encompasses not only the nuclear triad, but also other capabilities.

Deterrence Against China and Pakistan. Our deterrence will obviously be challenged by other affected Nations. Deterrence does not necessarily need overwhelming superiority but credible/deterrent capability. Military options/actions will always remain the final pivotal option to achieve national objectives both proactive and reactive. The Indian political and military leadership does carry out net assessment exercises regarding potential adversaries and needs to constantly review the deterrent capabilities which needs to be put in place against potential adversaries especially against a probably two and a half front threat against a collusive China-Pakistan. Security experts are talking of establishing credible deterrence and punitive deterrence against China and Pakistan respectively. For India, to list some of the main military deterrents would be a credible nuclear triad with second strike capability¹¹ (China has it and Pakistan claims full spectrum capability to justify their tactical nuclear weapons^{12,13}), capabilities of conventional ICBM/IRBM missile and rocket artillery, strategic lift, robust C5I2SRT (command, control, communications, computers, cyber, intelligence and information, reconnaissance and targeting), BMD (ballistic missile defence), and a robust maritime strategy to dominate IOR,

In relation to Pakistan, we face a peculiar problem of how and whom to deter! Pakistan has cleverly combined its conventional and nuclear capabilities in a way that makes it impossible for India to impose a penalty at a price that India is willing to pay. That's because Pakistan's conventional strength is sufficient to eliminate India's ability to impose significant costs with a low-intensity conventional response, and Pakistan has drawn its nuclear use red lines such that any high-intensity conventional response will lead to the risk of a nuclear war. In short, Pakistan has found a way to make the stability-instability paradox go one way. Pakistan may also use tactical nuclear weapons if presented an appropriate target contributing to the attainment of op or strategic objectives. This brings us to the strategic nuclear dilemma (faced by the major powers against each other like US, China and Russia) that India should not risk escalation for Pakistan to reach a perceived "use it or lose it" situation, especially if he perceives backing by USA. If and when India prosecutes offensive operations we must conduct a very effective Influence Operations against Pakistan and to the World too about the dangers of employing WMD, minimize vulnerabilities, and demonstrate the ability to continue operations if attacked. The option of exercising our stated nuclear policy is a constant.

Nuclear Challenges in South Asia: Dyadic Relations are no longer Pragmatic

South Asia is intertwined geo-politically with China and the USA. Every aspect of nuclearization especially between NWS therefore gets impacted accordingly (for nuclear policies and deterrence explanations see Note¹⁴). With Pakistan having become a client state of China, increasing collusion between the two, overt moves to contain India within South Asia, recent manoeuvres on the LC and LAC, large physical presence of Chinese in Pakistan and PoK, coupled with China's well-publicised all round assistance in the nuclear weapons domain, India-Pakistan nuclear relations certainly cannot remain dyadic¹⁵. There is however, a probability of China-India nuclear relations remaining dyadic (which too is increasingly becoming multi-lateral). Numerous studies and serious

literature emanating globally including assessment of war games and global/regional simulation exercises offer very interesting conclusions and recommendations, which are highlighted below:-

- No first use (NFU), lowered nuclear thresholds, conventional and nuclear entanglement (deployment, delivery systems, ISR and communications), 'escalate to de-escalate' and 'use it to lose it' concepts, emerging technology development are all interlinked and intertwined. Precedent set by one NWS, generally USA which has started a fresh nuclear arms race which is even more dangerous as it includes the entire nuclear eco-system (launch, warheads, communications, ISR, EW) with a US \$ One trillion grant.
- On China and India, there is a prevailing view among experts from both countries that they share the same stance on NFU, and that nuclear escalation between the two was not only unlikely but also unthinkable. While stabilising in the context of tensions at the China–India border, the assumption that both parties are operating from the same starting point merits greater examination—in relation not just to NFU but also to a range of nuclear postures from de-mating to targeting. Assumptions of 'postural parity' may bring stability in the short term but could contribute to misunderstanding and mis-signalling in the longer term.
- In South Asia, the confrontation between China and the West (USA and its allies), is witnessing a larger and more destabilizing role. China looks at US weapon sales to the region, the Indian–US nuclear deal, the US Indo-Pacific Strategy and the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, from the security prism; while the US are concerned about China's conventional and nuclear weapons outreach to Pakistan, military training, and the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Experts opine that the region could break into two camps, with the

USA and India on one side and China and Pakistan on the other.

- India is concerned that the Chinese practice of deployment and command and control of conventional and nuclear platforms collectively, would impact and be adopted in Pakistan's posture and planning.
- Increasing acceptance of counter force targeting by NWS originally adopted by Russia and Pakistan, has compelled USA and China to review their posture (USA has officially announced building more low yield tactical nuclear weapons). India may be forced to review its policy too.
- NWS opt for deterrence by denial strategies by developing conventional responses besides keeping each other's cities hostage to counter-value strikes. This helps raise the nuclear threshold and provide an incentive for bargaining but has its own shortcomings due to the nature of conventional deterrence that remains contestable, especially in an asymmetric military equation, where the one with the military advantage decides to test the resolve of the other, who in turn may be forced to respond with nuclear weapons, thus, leading to a deterrence breakdown¹⁶. Pakistan nuclear policy follows a similar dangerous line of thought that 'if a state continues to insist that they are mainly political weapons, and not to be used, these will stop deterring the adversary. Therefore, nuclear weapons only deter by the fact that they remain useable¹⁷.
- Emerging technologies like hypersonic weapons, AI, autonomous systems, 24X7 real time surveillance systems including satellites providing increasing transparency, shorter reaction times, will have a cascading effect which will transform South Asia's deterrence landscape and make it not only uncertain, unstable but prone to nuclear accidents with unimaginable consequences.

- grave asymmetries in India's and Pakistan's nuclear doctrines¹⁸, are compounded by mutual disbelief, existing and emerging military capabilities, and the prolonged absence of related dialogue mechanisms. The rest of the world is genuinely worried about a nightmarish scenario where a major terrorist attack attributed to Pakistan would raise a conventional Indian reaction. This in turn could result in Pakistan launching a low yield tactical nuclear weapon (tactical is relative as no nuclear weapon is tactical) to stall/halt the offensive. India could respond with massive nuclear retaliation. Indian capabilities of HGVs and ASAT could create a 'use it or lose it' scenario in Pakistan whenever tensions cross a threshold. The scenario having been simulated numerous times, experts agree have a high degree of probability. Risk reduction measures urgently needs to be institutionalised.

Does India's Nuclear Policy need a Review. So far, India's nuclear policy has stood the test of time. There is talk of an urgent review of India's nuclear policy, which may not be a bad idea for creating ambiguity, and there are two different views within the strategic circle. Mr Shiv Shankar Menon ex NSA, opines that "there is nothing in the present doctrine that prevents India from responding to appreciated contingencies"¹⁹. The second view advocates an urgent review, due to emerging disruptive technologies, the ability of adversaries to attrite the nuclear command, control and communication (C3) systems, and even the delivery and missile systems, full transparency, and split-second reaction times which have created vulnerabilities to a nations' second-strike capabilities.

Conventional War in a Nuclear Overhang: Complex and Ambiguous

While common understanding dictates that nuclear weapons preclude a major war, however, the "stability-instability paradox," allows limited war between conventional forces²⁰. The Soviet Union (USSR)-China conflict (1969), Kargil war (1999), South China Sea confrontation and East Ladakh (2020) standoff demonstrate that significant global

conventional military engagement between Nuclear Weapon States (NWS), and especially between India-Pakistan and India-China is very much possible. The imperatives of military engagement between nuclear powers are to stop short of nuclear conflict, which means, first, not crossing the conventional-nuclear divide, which is relatively clear, and second, staying on the safer side of the threshold between marginal conflict and a major war, a line which is vague at best.

Conclusion

International geo-political and security environment is undergoing rapid transformation leading to uncertainty and instability. South Asia plus China is home to three NWS who have an ongoing confrontationist relationship. When China and Pakistan gang up, interfere in India's strategic backyard, as also overtly tie down India's growth and strategic space in an already uneasy cauldron of Indo-Pacific confrontations involving global powers, we are looking at a messy, potent explosive region. It is important for India to understand that relations are no longer simply 'dyadic'. India need to continuously assess the trends, stay ahead of the loop to dominate the confrontation and conflicts which may emerge. For that 'New India' needs to transform to a 'Future Ready' India with matching CNP.

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(Endnotes)

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14. India's Nuc Posture. India summarized its nuclear posture in 2003 as follows:
 - I. Building and maintaining a credible minimum deterrent;
 - II. A posture of "No First Use": nuclear weapons will only be used in retaliation against a nuclear attack on Indian territory or on Indian forces anywhere;
 - III. Nuclear retaliation to a first strike will be massive and designed to inflict unacceptable damage;
 - IV. Nuclear retaliatory attacks can only be authorised by the civilian political leadership through the Nuclear Command Authority;
 - V. Non-use of nuclear weapons against non-nuclear weapon states;
 - VI. However, in the event of a major attack against India, or Indian forces anywhere, by biological or chemical weapons, India will retain the option of retaliating with nuclear weapons'.

Pakistan's Nuc Posture. Pakistan has not formally declared an official nuclear use doctrine. Pakistani officials maintain that ambiguity serves Pakistan's interests better, since ambiguity does not provide information about Pakistan's nuclear thresholds that an enemy would need to exploit gaps in the plans. constantly evolving on still others. The possibility of nuclear first use and a unilateral moratorium against nuclear testing remain constant. Minimum credible deterrence and basing the nuclear posture on nondeployment and de-mated weapons are ambiguous. Pakistan's National Command Authority announced full spectrum deterrence as a part of the national nuclear policy in 2013. Full spectrum deterrence may be defined as maintaining the credibility of deterrence at strategic, operational and tactical levels, thereby covering the entire threat spectrum. Its diversification of delivery means also indicates a shift from massive retaliation to graduated response, coupled with changes in future targeting strategies. It is also expected that Pakistan might, in the near future, perceive a need to move away from the non-deployment of its weapons. Its evolving sea-based capabilities, as well as its short-range ballistic missiles (SRBMs), may also necessitate a shift from centralized to delegated command and control.

China's Nuc Posture. China summarized its nuclear posture in 2019 as follows: 'China is always committed to a nuclear policy of no first use of nuclear weapons at any time and under any circumstances, and not using or threatening to use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear-weapon states or nuclear-weapon-free zones unconditionally. China advocates the ultimate complete prohibition and thorough destruction of nuclear weapons. China does not engage in any nuclear arms race with any other country and keeps its nuclear capabilities at the minimum level required for national security. China pursues a nuclear strategy of self-defense, the goal of which is to maintain national strategic security by deterring other countries from using or threatening to use nuclear weapons against China'.

Russian Nuc Posture. Russia has described its nuclear posture as defensive as recently as 2018. This posture combines the elements of 'launch under attack' and 'launch on warning', and some experts have described it as a 'reciprocal counterstrike'. In 2020 a new document— Basic Principles of State Policy of the Russian Federation on Nuclear Deterrence—was approved. While clarifying some aspects, the document maintains ambiguity in Russia's nuclear posture, such as with the use of nuclear weapons in response to a conventional attack.

USA Nuc Posture. The most recent document on US nuclear posture is the 2018 US Nuclear Posture Review. This calls for low-yield or tactical nuclear weapons as a flexible nuclear option. While maintaining a degree of ambiguity, it states that the USA could employ nuclear weapons to respond to 'significant non-nuclear strategic attacks', including those against 'US, allied, or partner civilian population or infrastructure', as well as 'US or allied nuclear forces, their command and control, or warning and attack assessment capabilities'.

Min Deterrence. Minimum, or minimal, deterrence is an application of deterrence theory in which a state possesses no more nuclear weapons than are necessary to deter an adversary from attacking. Pakistani experts have traditionally applied this term to describe Pakistan's application of deterrence.^h

Extended Deterrence. Extended deterrence is premised on the provision of US military forces, particularly nuclear forces, to deter intimidation, coercion or attack on US allies. It is also sometimes called a 'nuclear umbrella'.

15 As opposed to this author; Dr Adil Sultan Muhammad*, India-Pakistan Crises and the Evolving Dyadic Deterrence Model, IPRI Journal, Winter 2020, available at <https://ipripak.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Article-2-IPRI-Journal-XX-I-Ind-Pak-Det-ED-SSA-FINAL.pdf>. Accessed on 07 May 21

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- 20 The concept was originally developed to argue that conventional war is possible in a nuclear environment because neither side will risk escalating to the nuclear level. See Glenn H. Snyder, “The Balance of Power and the Balance of Terror,” in Paul Seabury, (ed.) *The Balance of Power*, (San Francisco: Chandler, 1965), pp. 185-201. In practice, as argued here, the level at which armed conflict is a viable proposition is restricted to marginal war.