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INDIA'S DETERRENCE GOLDBLOCKS DILMMA
IN SOUTH ASIA

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Abstract

In the last two decades, the world has experienced a massive shift. Developing countries have developed and are more aggressively pursuing their national interests. The two largest of these countries, China and India, have been at odds for decades over border disputes. Compounding this China's closer relations with Pakistan and attempts to encircle India, have pushed the two countries on a collision course, one that the US, which views China as a great power rival, would be well positioned to exploit.

However, the nuclear standoff between Pakistan and India makes this a delicate task. According to Vipin Narang's works, Pakistan has adopted an asymmetrical escalation nuclear posture that effectively deters India from pressuring it, even in the face of terrorist actions like the 2008 Mumbai attacks. In my research, I seek to present and examine possible paths that closer Indo-American collaboration can take without causing rapid instability in the region, and possible nuclear war. This paper examines the question, how could a closer future US-Indian partnership work to deter China and what impact could this have on Pakistan's nuclear strategy?

Keywords: South Asia, Nuclear posture, deterrence, China, US-India relations, China-India-Relations, Kashmir

Quadrilateral Nature of the South Asian Security Situation

The root cause of the South Asian security situation can be traced back to Kashmir. Ever since the bloody event that was the 1947 Partition of India occurred there has been bad blood between India and Pakistan. Despite the shared linguistic and culture heritage, the Hindu-Muslim divide that it created resulted in a situation that was destined to create war and strife. India was

far from united when it won its independence and the myriad of princely states and their rulers had, in theory, the choice to ascend to either India or Pakistan. Fifteen million people were forced to move and ten million lost their lives in the ensuing chaos (Dalrymple, 2017). India's Deputy Prime Minister Sardar Patel, now famously known as the Bismark of India, worked endlessly to create a politically integrated India and managed to coerce all but three States into the Union (Argov, 2018). In late 1947, Patel used force to bring both Hyderabad and Junagadh, both states with Muslim rulers, to join the union. On the other hand, Kashmir's Hindu ruler decided to join willingly, but his Muslim majority population and Pakistan did not accept this, resulting in the 1947 Indo-Pakistan war that split Kashmir in two. It is this territorial conflict that keeps Pakistan and India perennially fighting and makes close relations realistically impossible.

Making the conflict even more complicated, China's claims on northeast Kashmir and other parts of North India brought it into the mix in 1962, when during the Cuban missile crisis, Chinese troops took Indian-held territory in the Sino-Indian war (Tharoor, 2015). Later that year, Pakistan ceded the territory China claimed that it held in Kashmir to end all disputes and create better relations. This was the start of the "All-Weather Friendship" between the two countries, forming, in India's view, an anti-Indian alliance. Pakistan would later go on to facilitate relations between China and the US during the Nixon administration. Nowadays, China is Pakistan's largest military ally and has referred to Pakistan as "our Israel" (Deen, 2010).

However, in India's corner there is now the United States, which while having supported Pakistan in the past for help in Afghanistan, has slowly shifted to a strongly pro-India stance since 2000 (Stainiland, 2018). The US sees in India a natural democratic partner that can help it maintain its position in Asia, and greatly frustrate Chinese efforts at hegemony and power projection, and sought closer relations during Obama's pivot to Asia. As of now, the US and

India have signed the 2012 Defense Technology and Trade Initiative (DTTI) and in 2014 the Declaration on Defense Cooperation (DoD, 2019). Later, President Obama and Prime Minister Modi met during India's 66th Republic Day and hammered out a framework for the US-India defense relationship and a joint strategic vision for the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean Region, in addition to four projects under the DTTI. This all serves in the US point of view to cement the partnership with India.

In the Indian point of view, the US is a welcome interloper whose support could help tip the scales in India's favor a bit. China is much more developed militarily and economically and has used its financial resources to slowly cultivate relationships on India's borders, making India nervous and mistrustful of China's "peaceful rise" (Staniland, 2018). In addition, Chinese assistance to Pakistan's military, nuclear programs, and in international bodies, has become an unacceptable thorn in the side of India (Staniland, 2018). Not to mention the constant issues of territorial disputes that have existed since 1962, and which were exacerbated by the Doklam Standoff in 2017 (Staniland, 2018). At this moment, India is a defensive power under great pressure, pushed by a revisionist nuclear Pakistan on one side and a now superpower China on the other (Staniland, 2018). Something not often appreciated by DC is that India is not warming to the US out of some feeling of brotherhood among democratic states, but out of need and a shared interest in seeing the status quo in South Asia maintained (Cheng & Curtis, 2011). Which brings us to the main point of this paper, how can a US-Indian partnership work to deter China and what impact does this have on Pakistan's nuclear strategy?

In answering this question there are two aspects that must be examined. The first is what can India do to more effectively deter China from encroaching on its territory and region, and in what ways can the US facilitate this. The second, and much more tricky issue, is how the US can do this without causing alarming changes to Pakistani nuclear strategy. According to Vipin Narang's work, Pakistan has already adopted an asymmetrical escalation nuclear posture that effectively deters India from pressuring it, but, also, increases the risk of nuclear theft and accidental launch. This means that Pakistan has operationalized its nuclear capabilities to deliver a first strike against India should conventional conflict arise between the two. Since the events of the 1971 war, Pakistan has always been very sensitive about the relative balance of power between itself and India and given Pakistan's nuclear program it is best that the US take into consideration its perspective in future US-Indian plans if it wishes to maintain stability in the region. Essentially, this leaves India in a goldilocks dilemma, where it must increase its capabilities so Chinese decision-makers fear it, without causing Islamabad to panic (Joshi, 2019).

Deterring China

One of the main goals of a US-India alliance, especially from the viewpoint of India, would be to deter China from further action and expansionism along the Indian border, in terms of both claimed territory and attempts to limit India's relations with its neighbors. When it comes to understanding and conceptualizing deterrence, I find it most helpful to remember the Doctor Strangelove quote: "Deterrence is the art of producing in the mind of the enemy... the FEAR to attack." (Kubrick, 1964). What is key here is the mind of the enemy, and as such we need to know what China thinks of India. To properly do this I would need to know Mandarin, but since

I don't, I have based this part of my work on the scholarship done by Xiaoping Yang for the Carnegie Endowment.

My first and foremost takeaway from her work is the simple fact that China is not worried about India and doesn't view it as a security threat (Yang 2016). There are two chief reasons at work for this thinking, first is that there is a capability gap, especially in technology, between the two countries in favor of China. The second factor is the no-war bottom-line threshold, which simply means China believes neither side wants war and will not push any issue to that point. All of this is further built off the assumption that China doesn't need to respond to India as a nuclear power. Again, there are two reasons for this assumption. One is that China doesn't fully believe the story that India developed its weapons to deter China. While they do understand that India feels pressured from the Sino-Pakistan alliance, they feel that since the Chinese nuclear capability is concentrated on the US that India's worries are baseless. Instead, Chinese strategic circles believe that India went overtly nuclear for political reasons of prestige, and that there is no real intention on India's part to threaten China. Secondly, China doesn't worry about India's nukes due to India's "no first use" policy and limited nuclear capability, again like before China doesn't believe India's seriously intends to fight it. Essentially, at the root of China's threat perception of India lies the fact that China does not see a situation in which the two countries would involve themselves in a full-scale war, conventional or nuclear.

However, despite this outlook, Yang points out several current events that have started to cause China some concern. The US-India nuclear deal in 2008 was the first, though Beijing's main worry was the wavering support for the NPT regime in DC, furthermore, it expressed concern about the possibility of dual use technology that could help lead to an arms race in Asia (Yang, 2016). The second event was when in 2010 India's no-first-use policy seemed to evolve

from a “no-first-use” to a “no first use against non-nuclear weapons states”. Again, this goes back to China’s reasoning that if it sees no aggressive intention from India it doesn’t need to worry, and these changes could snowball.

A further step in the wrong direction, from China’s point of view, was the initiatives that India rolled out as a partner of the US. Next, was India forming a special border force specifically meant to deal with Tibet and border issues. Finally, there was the launching of India’s nuclear submarine in 2016, the *Arihant*, which while not worrying China due to its lack of technical sophistication, was yet another step that increases the chance of future crisis. Again, China doesn’t yet feel that India is a security threat, but it is not happy with the direction it is going. According to Yang, China’s future threat perception of India will be shaped by three factors: foreign support for India, the enhancement of India’s conventional military, and how China’s interactions with India regarding border disputes and Tibet play out. This understanding of how China views India gives us a basic roadmap about the direction we can go and what types of support would help India to be taken more seriously by China.

Pakistani Nuclear Strategy and Full-Spectrum Deterrence

However, before we can go ahead and start putting forth ideas about what kind of support the US should offer to India, there is the matter of Pakistan's nuclear capabilities, which Vipin Narang’s work outlines beautifully. Pakistan has operationalized its nuclear capabilities to create an asymmetric escalation posture. Where a state, historically a state conventionally inferior to its adversary, operationalizes its nuclear capacity so that it can launch a first strike, thus deterring the use of both nuclear and conventional capabilities against itself (Narang, 2010). For this posture to be credible under circumstances when an adversary attacks, there must be some level

of delegation of authority and the states nuclear capabilities must be married to its armed forces (Narang, 2010). This is in order to ensure the enemy understands that any aggressive action is likely to trigger a nuclear response despite how the enemy might try to sow confusion. Additionally, this means this posture relies partially on the state being unambiguous about its capabilities and deployment in order to get the maximum deterrence effect (Narang, 2010).

Currently only Pakistan employs this posture, given the extreme difference in the power of their conventional forces and India's. All Pakistani commanders have the memory of the humiliating defeat in the 1971 war seared into their minds, when India succeed in splitting the country in half in a mere thirteen days (Singh, 2016). While Pakistan would prefer a strategic restraint regime with India of some kind that would limit conventional and nuclear forces, but it understands that this will never happen due to India's security concerns regarding China (Rubin & Stulberg, 2018). Furthermore, Pakistan doesn't view stability as possible until India shows it is serious about solving territorial disputes, which given India's advantageous position is highly unlikely (Rubin & Stulberg, 2018). Therefore, the perceived growth in Indian capabilities combined with the view that diplomatic solutions are a pipedream has resulted in the current Pakistani strategy for strategic stability being full spectrum deterrence, threatening nukes in conventional conflict through its nuclear posture.

In his experiment, Narang looks at the history of conflict between India and Pakistan since they gained nuclear capacities and evaluates the deterrence effect that each posture had while employed. His results are very straightforward in that the asymmetric escalation posture is

“deterrence optimal” for Pakistan (Narang, 2010). The evidence for this lies in the fact that while the US was able to help deescalate and end conflicts for Pakistan while it employed the catalytic posture, it did not deter India from using conventional means against Pakistan at times (Narang, 2010). On the other hand, since employing the asymmetric escalation posture Pakistan has had, at the time of the Narang article, no Indian conventional forces had set foot on its soil, even in the aftermath of two major ISI supported terrorist attacks (Narang, 2010). This posture has served as a shield from which Pakistan can use sub-conventional means to attack India with no fear of reprisal, resulting in a stability-instability paradox. The idea behind the paradox is that the nuclear weapons will deter major actions by an opponent resulting in strategic stability, which paradoxically makes lower levels of violence safer since the other party can’t escalate in response without threatening nuclear conflict (Jervis, 1989).

However, this could lead to even greater escalation and instability in the region which as use of sub-conventional attacks has led India to become frustrated and desperate for reprisal and it has been considering strategies, such as Operation Cold Start, that it believes will allow it to strike Pakistan in a limited fashion without crossing the nuclear redline (Narang, 2010). This could result in Pakistan delegating even more authority and increase the risk of accidental use even more to maintain the credibility of its deterrent against Indian conventional forces, which Narang asserts would put the region on permanent crisis footing, as both countries are playing ever more dangerous games of brinksmanship.

Furthermore, Narang finishes by noting another major issue with the posture. First, the delegation of launch authority and relative lack of security measures on weapons means there is a much higher risk of accidental launch and possible theft of nuclear devices than exists in other nuclear states (Narang, 2010). The risk of theft is something that Pakistan is aware of and according to the NTI Nuclear Security Index Pakistan has greatly improved its security against theft and now scores just barely below India. However, the same report rates Pakistan's risk environment as still being the worst in the world with almost no improvement since 2012 (NTI, 2018). In his conclusion, Narang calls on India and Pakistan to improve relations and improve communication, and on the international community to help Pakistan make its posture safer (Narang 2010).

These risks are why it is so vital that the US take Pakistan's worries into account when considering what assistance to give to India. I believe given the risks it is more likely than not the world will someday see a nuclear issue stemming from Pakistan, either accidental launch or theft. For this reason, it is imperative that we do not do anything that would make Pakistan's arsenal more dangerous, and it would be in our interests to not encourage Pakistan to either mass produce Tactical Nuclear Weapons or develop MIRVs or Thermonuclear weapons to create "full spectrum deterrence" (Rubin & Stulberg, 2018). This is what I refer to as the "redline". Since Pakistan adding tactical nuclear weapons would likely increase the risk of an accidental launch and adding MIRVs or Thermonuclear weapons to their arsenal would mean that when an issue finally arises it will be much more damaging by an order of magnitude.

Recent events have seen the issue of Pakistani tactical nuclear weapons pushed to the forefront. At the end of January 2019, Pakistan tested a nuclear capable close-range ballistic

missile, called a NASR (Panda, 2019). The development of the NASR was in response to the Indian Cold Start doctrine (Panda, 2019) Then on February 14, 2019 Pakistan based terrorist group named Jaish-e-Mohammad killed 46 Indian soldiers in a terrorist attack, Leading India to respond with an airstrike on February 26th at Balakot, in Pakistani held territory (BBC, 2019). It is still unknown at the time of this writing what will happen next. However, this strike when compared with past Indian action, such as the surgical strike in 2016, is a definite escalation, and shows that India's frustration is slowly pushing towards greater conflict. In turn this will push Pakistan to get tactical weapons out into the field to deter India retaliations. As such, it is possible that there is now little we can do to prevent Pakistan from crossing the redline, which is why I will include a variety of policy suggestions to be considering even if it could risk pushing Pakistan.

Options for US assistance to India - Low Risk and High Risk

As so often is the case with in the political realm, what one cannot do is what shapes the strategies that one formulates. Taking what we now know about Pakistan's nuclear situation and some of the worries they have regarding Indian capabilities, the US and India have several limited options on how they could tackle the goldilocks dilemma in South Asia.

Cyber

First, Cyber capabilities due to their non-violent nature are generally viewed as acts of war (Kello, 2013). Therefore, they also come under the nuclear threshold. Maybe one of the best examples would be Stuxnet, which while doing its job beautifully, required a great deal of effort for a limited short-lived impact (Lindsay, 2013) The Iranian response limited itself to similar, though less sophisticated, cyber-attacks (Lindsay, 2013). However, it did serve additional purpose in that it gave Israel a manner of attacking Iran's program without risking war.

Therefore, US-Indian collaboration in the cyber field especially if targeted at fighting terrorism, could be a similar outlet for India and could lessen the stability-instability paradox. It would give India its own sub conventional capability to strike back against Pakistan's and could lessen immediate pressure in India to see Pakistan made an example of after every attack in Kashmir.

However, cyber has several aspects that weaken its attractiveness for India, despite the countries high level capabilities it can generate by leveraging its IT sector. First is the issue of how much damage such attacks can do when compared with the personnel cost (Kello, 2013). Second could be blowback problems for India, attribution is the perennial problem when it comes to dealing with a cyber-attack and even the smallest group of actors on the international stage could find a target somewhere in a country and attack (Kello, 2013; Nye, 2013; Schneider, 2018). This means that if India began to commit cyber-attacks in retaliation and began to claim credit for them in public for political purposes that you might face blame for every cyber issue that occurs in its adversaries' countries and very soon face retaliation of a more kinetic nature. Thirdly and most importantly, cyber capabilities offer no deterrence value, and could eventually serve to undermine strategic stability with other nuclear powers (Kello, 2013; Nye, 2013; Gartzke & Lindsay, 2017; Schneider, 2018). The issue is that signaling to an adversary that you have some cyber capability that you want to use to deter or compel them that you would be giving the adversary a good chance to fix their defenses (Kello, 2013). Therefore, when it comes to cyber-attack is better than defense and sharing information about your capabilities is bad strategy. Which means cyber can't be used to deter, Furthermore, the possibility of using cyber-attacks on command and control structures, presents a risk that nuclear states feel that their nuclear deterrents could be undermined (Gartzke & Lindsay, 2017). While this issue appears to be

minimal now for the region, it could steadily lead to a breakdown of strategic stability between China, Pakistan, and India as newer command and control systems are put in place over time. So while cyber would help India close the capability gap with China somewhat, it would add little to deterrence against them, so it is low reward.

Nuclear Submarine

India's Nuclear Submarine, the Arihant, launched in 2016 has a rather fatal flaw, it can't hit anything in China (Joshi, 2019). Therefore, it is essentially a vanity project, as Pakistan is the only thing it could reach, and India's nuclear air and ground capabilities are already enough for deterring Pakistan (Joshi, 2019). This means that all the issues it would cause of Pakistan have already been caused, and improvements to the ICBM and ship design would do little to change the redline. However, it would greatly increase India's nuclear capabilities vis-à-vis China. On the other hand, it seems unlikely that the US Congress would approve such cooperation until relations between the US and India formally become closer.

Environmental Infantry Training

While Pakistan is highly concerned about Indian's conventional forces the area which it would most likely face India in the Punjab, which is very different from the areas India faces China. Training infantry specifically for jungle and mountain terrain that India is serious about defending its border claims in places like Doklam, while not showing any change that should cause Pakistan much worry.

Nuclear Aid

Pakistan's goal is to remain as much at military and nuclear parity with India as possible. Therefore, any event that leads to India acquiring tactical nuclear weapons, MIRVs, or

thermonuclear weapons would create instant panic in Pakistan to acquire the same weapon. This would lead to a pretty instant breakdown in strategic stability, however, it given past comments it would influence China perceptions.

Missile Defense

One of the aims of the January Nasr missile test was to prove that the missile would be maneuverable enough to defeat “any currently available BMD (ballistic missile defense) system in our neighborhood” (Panda, 2019). This comes shortly after the 2019 US Missile Defense Review was released and mentioned possible BMD cooperation with India, and regardless India expects to receive such a BMD system from Russia in 2020. (Panda, 2019) Pakistan clearly views any attempt to undermine the deterrence of its nuclear strategy as its priority to deal with and any work done in this field will without a doubt push them to cross the redline and field tactical nuclear weapons.

Conventional Ground forces

As stated before, Pakistan’s entire nuclear strategy is based on deterring the conventionally superior India. Efforts to increase India’s conventional capabilities will likely cause Pakistan to increasingly worry about an operation cold start scenario, and it is already seeking tactical nuclear weapons to deter this from happening. Thus, this is risky, but strong conventional ground forces are exactly what India most needs to focus on to deter China in the border regions.

Formal Alliance

A formal alliance with India against China and the extension of American security guarantees could be the most powerful deterrent that India could hope for against China. The

issue with Formal Alliances isn't simply that they would worry Islamabad, they would. The simple fact is that we are not yet at a point in time with our relationship with India that this is possible. While it would go a long way to making China take India seriously, India is simply not ready to put its eggs in one basket. The US-India relationship is a relatively new one, and it has suffered from a lack of care under the Trump administration. While he has said some nice things about Modi, Trump has not furthered cooperation in any meaningful way. In fact, his attitude and policies on immigration has caused some issues with the Indian IT sector, and more recently his administrations attempts to push India to stop buying Iranian oil, which the country with its lack of domestic energy sources desperately needs, have led New Delhi to be cautious in its negotiations with DC (Stratfor, 2019).

Additionally, there are questions if this alliance is desirable for the US given the current situation, India is facing major domestic challenges and there are some real questions about its ability to deliver on the hopes that US policy makers have for it (Staniland, 2018). US interests are very much at the periphery of India domestic politics, while both countries are democracies this never led to especially good relations in the past like it did in the west (Staniland, 2018). The Indian economy is growing fast, but also generating massive income inequality, underemployment, brain drain, and drought (Staniland, 2018). Militarily the countries forces are primarily focused on Kashmir and Pakistan, tying large quantities of manpower and military spending down (Staniland, 2018). As much as India would like to remove itself from the India-Pakistan dyad, issues in Kashmir and growing nationalism constantly draw it back into a fight the US would much rather not take part in (Rubin & Stulberg, 2018). The caution on both sides to solidify a defense relationship are built upon some major hurdles that will take time to hash out.

Conclusion

India is in a Goldilocks Dilemma in which it must increase its capabilities vis-à-vis China, but at the same time must not cause undue panic in neighboring Islamabad. Pakistan has used its nuclear capabilities to create an asymmetrical escalation posture and is seeking full-spectrum deterrence against India. In doing so it creates risks that both the region and wider world must concern themselves with. With this paper, I have attempted to examine ways that the US-India collaboration could work to deter China from further encroachment upon the region, while not pushing Pakistan to increase its nuclear arsenal and create even greater risks. The options are limited, but they are there and might serve as first steps to a greater strategy. Later, if Pakistan should cross the redline or should the situation between China and India demand.

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