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China, India and Pakistan: A Nuclear Arms Race in Asia?

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Is there a nuclear arms race in Asia between China, India and Pakistan? These three countries are home to over 2.5 billion people, or 40 per cent of the global population. An excessive spending on nuclear weapons systems will not only deprive their large populations of the fruits of development, but also holds out the possibility of a horrendous conflict.

China, India and Pakistan

India, Pakistan and China all share disputed borders with each other. While China is significantly stronger than India in most economic criteria, the latter is beginning to catch up. Pakistan's population is about one-seventh that of India's, and it has a slightly lower per capita income, making it economically much smaller than both its neighbours. India has fought wars with both China and Pakistan, with ongoing tensions in Jammu & Kashmir vitiating the security atmosphere between the two nations. On the other hand, Pakistan and China enjoy a security relationship akin to an alliance. China has the largest armed forces in the world and its nuclear strategic forces, developed over decades, are significantly bigger than those of both India and Pakistan.

Having tested its first nuclear weapon in October 1964, China is an acknowledged nuclear weapon power under the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). India and Pakistan tested nuclear devices only in May 1998, and their nuclear status is not officially recognised. (India's "peaceful nuclear explosion" in May 1974 is not considered to be a weaponised nuclear test.)

In terms of the three countries' respective conventional military capabilities, the situation is more ambiguous. While Chinese armed forces have strength in numbers and a large inventory of combat aircraft, armoured vehicles, artillery and war-fighting ships, India betters it in both the quality and numbers of mod-

ern military hardware. In numerical terms, Pakistan's armed forces are about half that of India's, and its major weapons systems are somewhat outdated in comparison.

What Constitutes a Nuclear Arms Race?

An arms race may be defined as a competitive acquisition of weapons systems driven by the perceived capabilities of an adversary's weapons holdings and its plans of future acquisition. The emphasis should be on the competitive acquisition of sufficient quantity and expense to impact domestically, as well as to cause concern in the wider region.

In the case of conventional weapons systems, this is both easy to understand and define. In conventional wars, forces fight each other and are supported by their weapons systems.

Should an opponent acquire an additional armoured division or a longer range and more effective artillery gun or missile, military logic would call for matching acquisitions in the shortest possible time in order to match the adversary's capabilities. In strategic planning, a significant gap or a degree of asymmetry with a potential adversary cannot be allowed to develop.

It is qualitatively different in nuclear weaponry, especially among countries with modest nuclear arsenals. The purpose of nuclear weapons then becomes primarily to deter. Nuclear weapons do not target other nuclear weapons. They do not fight each other. They are not meant for war-fighting. They target civilian populations or other sites of such great value as to be immensely damaging. The object is to deter the other side from using its nuclear weapons. Therefore, the quantum of nuclear weapons required is determined by the need to have an assured capability of inflicting unacceptable destruction on the enemy plus a second strike capability.

For countries such as China, India and Pakistan, the number of nuclear weapons may be more finite and smaller than those of Cold War rivals. For example, the nuclear forces of the United States (US) and the Soviet Union multiplied in the 1960s and 1970s in a competitive manner, as each matched the other's weapons and air, land and sea delivery systems. This arms race took place when accepted nuclear doctrine was evolving through stages, including counter-force strategies that incorporated war-fighting.

China never accepted the competitive nuclear logic of the Cold War superpowers. Therefore, over the last three decades and more China's arsenal has remained modest (although it maintains a reasonably assured minimum second strike capability against targets of value to the US).

China's example is likely to remain the model for Indian and Pakistani nuclear arsenals and delivery systems. From all accounts, the nuclear weapons of both countries are likely to remain in the low hundreds.

Nonetheless, a number of caveats remain which may upset the above conclusion. Firstly, how much is enough even in these circumstances? Numbers are essentially a subjective assessment. Secondly, military planning is all about contingencies. Reserves for unexpected situations are essential and finite limits are hard to set. Thirdly, deterrence is subject to an adversary's ability to interdict delivery means. Mutual vulnerability thus becomes an important part of deterrence. Should a side be perceived to have an effective anti-air and ballistic missile defence capability or is seen to be moving credibly in that direction, then every effort will be made to counter this. Fortunately, for the next decade or two, credibility and options lie with the defender and not the attacker. Finally, for Pakistan and, even more importantly, for India, the numbers of weapons and delivery means are presently far from adequate, even measured by the criteria of their minimum deterrence doctrines. Hence, early additional acquisition may be necessary to cover the mismatch between doctrine and capability. Of course, this will entail short-term increases in defence budgets.

A state of nuclear deterrence may also allow China, India and Pakistan to anticipate the unlikelihood of conventional attack from each other. In turn, all three may accept a conventional weapons asymmetry for a short duration without feeling compelled to respond immediately. Somewhat secure behind their respective nuclear arsenals, these countries do not have to match new conventional acquisitions by an adversary as rapidly as they have in the past. This actually contributes to the absence of an arms race, particularly in conventional weapons, among China, India and Pakistan. Indeed, it may be argued that Pakistan has been able to adopt this approach as its recent defence budgets apparently have not shown a significant increase.

Nuclear Policies and Capabilities

China detonated its first nuclear bomb with the aim of deterring the US and to counter possible nuclear threats perceived at the time. Its missiles were planned and developed to be able to hit US strategic targets in phases, first in Asia and then in the continental US.

Simultaneously, China announced a policy of "no first use" and "non-use against a non-nuclear weapon power", and has held to these principles until today. A case can also be made, however, that China has moved steadily to a position of what it calls "limited deterrence" (a term used in justifying military actions against both India in 1962 and Vietnam in 1979). In nuclear terms, limited deterrence might mean adopting what it calls "self-defence counter-attacks".

While China's strategic thinking, as described above, may appear to be a responsible position, there are areas of concern. Firstly, there is a high opacity in all aspects of the country's nuclear programme, particularly its nuclear arsenal, making it difficult to accept all its statements at face value. Secondly, China's doctrine of limited deterrence could undermine its no first use promise. Finally, the country's policy of supplying intermediate range missiles to Saudi Arabia (perhaps up to 36 CSS-2 missiles were sold to the kingdom in 1987), and nuclear weapons technology, test facilities and M-9 and M-11 missiles to Pakistan belie the stated intentions of its nuclear strategy of deterring India only.

In August 1999, India's National Security Advisory Board submitted a draft nuclear doctrine to the government. This report has apparently been accepted in principle. In February 2003, the Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS) announced the establishment of a Nuclear Command Authority and created a Strategic Forces Command. The respective areas of the draft doctrine that were accepted by the CCS were:

- A commitment to no first use (although this may be negated in the case of chemical or biological attack).
- Building a credible minimum deterrent.
- The non-use of nuclear weapons against non-nuclear weapon states.
- A moratorium on further nuclear tests.
- An agreement to join the discussion on a Fissile Material Cut-off Treaty.

The draft nuclear doctrine defined minimum deterrence to include delivery capabilities by all three branches of its armed forces. Though the government has been silent on this score, this commitment to a triad of nuclear weapons delivery systems should be assumed to be official Indian policy. The development of such an all round capability will be expensive and difficult to achieve (China has struggled to deploy submarine-launched nuclear weapons since 1982 without success). However, overall, the doctrine supports what may be argued to be a non-competitive nuclear posture.

Pakistan's motivation to acquire nuclear weapons is entirely conditioned by the perceived threat presented by India. Although Pakistan accepts that nuclear weapons are meant solely as weapons of deterrence, it does not have a no first use policy. It may well initiate the use of nuclear weapons in a serious armed conflict with India. The conditions whereby Pakistan may consider the first use of nuclear weapons (as stated by General Khalid Kidwai, Director General of Strategic Plans, to the Landau Network Study Group which visited Pakistan in late 2001) include:

- Geography: facing the conquest of a large part of its territory.
- Military: facing the destruction of a large part of land or air forces.

- Economic: facing a stranglehold on its economy and/or economic infrastructure.
- Political: facing the destabilisation of national cohesion through subversion.

While these thresholds may appear low and somewhat vaguely defined, they do not in themselves foretell the immediate or likely employment of nuclear weapons. To provide credibility, operationalising a first use doctrine must entail assured capability, full command-and-control security, and a high-level articulation of a threat of use. Nonetheless, such a strategy does not require an extensive nuclear arsenal, and Pakistan's current capabilities seem more than sufficient.

A greater concern to the world regarding Pakistan's nuclear potential is the risk of proliferation. Recent reports have exposed possible links between Pakistan nuclear scientists and personnel and interested parties in North Korea, Saudi Arabia, Libya and Iran. According to the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), some of Pakistan's top nuclear scientists were involved in passing on nuclear secrets to these countries. Several were been extensively "de-briefed" in December 2003 by the government of Pakistan, which continues to deny any official involvement in the passing of nuclear weapons' knowledge.

The Impact on Defence Budgets

China's military expenditure has been guided by Deng Xiaoping's statement in the June 1985 conference of the Expanded Central Military Commission that defence modernization was to be postponed to give priority to national economic construction. Since then, the country's defence expenditure has dropped in relation to both its gross domestic product (GDP), and as a percentage of overall government expenditure. This changed only in the late 1990s when spending was increased in order to provide better living standards for Peoples Liberation Army (PLA) personnel, and to off-set some of the army's commercial undertakings.

Most studies concede that China's defence expenditure in comparison to its economy and the size of its armed forces is modest. David Shambaugh estimates that the country's defence budget amounted to US\$31.6 billion in 2000, while the Institute for International Strategic Studies (IISS) in London estimates that China's actual spending on defence and defence-related issues is likely to be about three times this figure.

Not so modest is China's expenditure on its strategic forces. The Second Artillery has consistently enjoyed a higher allocation and priority in defence planning and expenditure. No money has been spared for its modernisation. Though its nuclear arsenal is comparatively small, it encompasses a comprehensive range of weapons and their delivery systems. Work continues on their improvement.

In recent years, India's defence budget has shown a steady increase. The country's overall defence expenditure of Rs.653 billion (approximately US\$29.61 billion) projected for 2003-2004 is only about 2.5 per cent of India's GDP. This cannot be considered an excessive amount by any calculation, especially when seen in the context of the 1999 Kargil War and the ongoing war

against terrorism in Jammu & Kashmir. Much of the defence budget is geared to recouping operational losses and upgrading India's capability to fight terrorism.

However, note that neither nuclear weapons nor missiles are included in the above Indian defence budget figures. Instead, these are shown as expenses for the Atomic Energy Commission and other projects of defence research and development.

Pakistan's defence expenditure merits a mere one-line reference in the government's annual budget, and has no accompanying data. Nonetheless, the IISS estimates the country's defence expenditure in 2000 to have been US\$3 billion or more. From all available data, Pakistan's defence expenditure has not grown unduly in recent years.

A Nuclear Arms Race?

Have the above levels of defence expenditure placed an unacceptable strain on the economies of China, India and Pakistan? The answer is clearly negative. China's economy continues to boom, while India's enjoys perhaps the second-fastest rate of growth in the world for major countries at around 6 % a year over the last decade. Pakistan, too, has seen an impressive economic recovery recently although, of the three states under consideration, it is the one most affected by additional expenses connected with its nuclear build-up.

China's economic development has been helped by consistent high foreign direct investment (FDI). In the last fifteen years, its annual FDI has been about 25 % more than its defence budget. In India, increases in the defence budget have been kept to a minimum and, at about 2.5 per cent of GDP, defence expenditure is eminently maintainable without unduly straining economic development. Pakistan's economy has benefited greatly by America's desire to keep it onside during the current "War on Terrorism", and US has written off international loans and provided the country with substantial additional financial assistance.

For both China and Pakistan, it is apparent that nuclear deterrence capabilities have actually allowed these two countries to cap their conventional arms spending. China's capabilities need to contend with the US and, perhaps, Russia—even though it has entered in to a strategic relationship with the latter. With an ambiguous but effective nuclear deterrence in place, there is no need for China to match the conventional weapons acquisitions of its potential adversaries (which could well pose difficulties even to its robust economy). Therefore, the country's military weapons modernisation remains on hold. Pakistan has not attempted to match India's conventional capabilities and acquisitions of recent years. It can afford to postpone such purchases as it is assured a strategic deterrent capability.

Can this situation change and a nuclear and/or conventional arms race take place between China, India and Pakistan? Yes, in at least three scenarios. The first is if the US persists with operationalising a nuclear missile defence system. In this case, China may find its strategic deterrent ineffective, and attempt to create a much stronger missile and nuclear weapons capability that can

overwhelm US defences. A second scenario is one where Pakistan continues to facilitate cross-border terrorism in India. A point may well come when India may feel compelled to respond conventionally through a limited war under a nuclear umbrella. This scenario may lead to both India and Pakistan developing competitive nuclear weapons capabilities. A similar, third scenario is if India attempts to find a conventional war-fighting threshold where its conventional superiority over Pakistan can be used to punish the latter for its intransigence without necessarily provoking a nuclear response. Perceptions that India is contemplating such a move may lead both it and Pakistan into a competitive conventional weapons programme of acquisition.

In addition to the above, there are several other possible scenarios of a somewhat lower probability that may lead to a nuclear and/or conventional arms race between China, India and Pakistan. These include the incursion of Chinese naval assets into the Indian Ocean and/or the enhancement of China's troop presence and war-fighting infrastructure in Tibet, both of which might provoke an Indian build-up of nuclear and/or conventional counters. Similarly, an Indian success in completing submarine launch ballistic systems may necessitate the development of a similar capability by Pakistan. Finally, the acquisition of nuclear weapons and missiles by Iran and/or Saudi Arabia may provoke a suitable regional response.

Conclusion

There is nothing in the above analysis to suggest there is a nuclear arms race in Asia between China, India and Pakistan. Indeed, the current situation indicates a rather benign scenario. Sino-Indian relations took a fairly dramatic upturn after the visit of the Indian prime minister to China in mid-2003. Indo-Pakistan relations also have improved after the highly positive outcomes of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) summit in Islamabad in January 2004. Should such diplomatic negotiations continue, there are possibilities of further measures to address security issues and reduce defence spending in China, India and Pakistan. The international community, including the European Union, needs to encourage this process.

A Note on the Author

After 36 years in active service with the Indian Army, Major General Dipankar Banerjee sought voluntary retirement in August 1996 to pursue full time his interests in policy research. He is currently the Head and Director of the Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies (IPCS), New Delhi, an independent think tank on peace and security which he helped found in 1996, and to which he recently returned after stints at the United States Institute of Peace, Washington DC, and the Regional Centre for Strategic Studies, Colombo.

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