

Strategic Stability Paradigm in South Asia

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### Abstract

The advent of nuclear weapons has brought into discussion the strands of strategic stability that initially occupied the Cold War rivals and later the neighboring states of South Asia. Both Soviet Union and United States due to distanced geography with that of settled strategic language has almost brought positive tendency in crisis management and strategic stability. Contrary to Cold War rivals, the South Asian nuclear opponents have gone through vulnerability of strategic miscalculation and crisis instability. That is why at most of their direct military stalemates, the US and Soviets had to jump in to defuse the crises. Moreover, Indian military modernization, deliberate maintenance of conventional asymmetry, application of sub-conventional warfare, state sponsored terrorism, regional dominance and global aspirations interlinked with containment of China under Indo-US strategic partnership has altogether shaped the contemporary discourse of strategic stability in South Asia. This study makes the point that the strands of strategic stability between the two regional powers of South Asia are tied to the complex web of bilateral, regional and global framework. It is in this larger construct that strategic stability in South Asia can be best described. This study is deductive in nature and theoretically evaluates the notion of strategic stability paradigm to deconstruct the prevailing fault lines.

*Keywords:* Strategic Stability, nuclear weapons, South Asia, Flexible Response, Massive Retaliation, Cold War, USA, Soviet Union/Russia, Pakistan, India, Deterrence, Crisis Stability,

## Strategic Stability Paradigm in South Asia

### Introduction

In 1955, Winston Churchill while delivering his last speech to Parliament shed his views on a nuclear-armed world and said that “safety would be the sturdy child of terror and survival the twin brother of annihilation” (Rose, 2017). In notional domain, strategists and intellectuals have yet to establish a consensus on the definition of strategic stability and its constituents. However, every nation individually endures and aspires for strategic stability. During Cold War, the dynamics of strategic stability mainly relied on surviving a ‘first nuclear strike’ with that of capability to respond back through ‘massive nuclear retaliation’ (Wilkening, 2014). Over the period of time Cold War perspective of strategic stability transformed into holistic inquiry and character. The amalgamation of traditional to non-traditional strands of strategic stability brought into discussion varying concepts and determinants such as history, geography, socio-political structures, technological prowess, economic imperatives, leadership and military power (Herd, 2010). Before proceeding further with the inquiry on strategic stability in South Asia, it would be imperative to crystallize a response to the aspects of concept, evolution, constituents, determinants, its functional paradigm and impact of strategic environment on strategic stability.

To achieve this one has to get back to the very origin of notion of strategic stability, which is predominantly connected with post US nuclear strike in WW-II and advent of Cold War that brought to forefront the question of US vulnerability to surprise attack. The threat of surprise attack gave birth to the fundamental tenets of strategic stability and gave prominence to the Brodie’s (1959) and Borden’s (1946) concept of ‘assured retaliatory strike’ now called as ‘second strike capability’. The idea got matured with the question about logical response to vulnerability. Absence of clarity about Russian’s thinking ushered the debate over concepts of

transparency and interdependence. Concept of stability was based on logic of reliability and assurance about absence of surprise attack. A brief resume of evolution of strategic stability and its conceptual contours can be best illustrated through under mentioned developments.

### **Massive Retaliation**

Threat of Russian nukes posed urgency on the nuclear intellect dealing with the response strategy in USA to formulate a response. As the weaponry was not mature so were the concept, same led to the enacting of the first declared strategy of massive retaliation by Eisenhower, however strategy had an inbuilt inadequacy to deter a surprise attack (Wells, 1981). Moreover, it narrowed down the US options to respond across full spectrum of conflict. Concurrently, efforts were being made to bring certain level of transparency in nuclear framework through initiative like “Open Skies” (Hall, 1992).

### **Flexible Response – Origin of Deterrence through Assured Destruction**

John F. Kennedy’s flexible response was articulated on the basis of response across the full spectrum of threat (Stromseth, 1998). It hinged upon capable conventional force and assured ‘second strike capability’. This gave prominence to the concept of ‘Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD)’ and resulted in strategic stalemate (Sokolski, 2004). It mitigated the risks of surprise attack and induced a dangerous concept of stability in nuclear paradigm.

### **Balance of Terror**

Albert Wohlstetter deliberations on “Balance of Terror” broke ground on strategic stability in 1960. Based on the logic he said that “if peace were founded firmly on mutual terror and mutual terror on symmetrical nuclear powers, this would be, (as Churchill has said), ‘a melancholy paradox, nonetheless a most comforting one’” (Wohlstetter, 1959). The concept

found synonymous to 'Mutually Assured Destruction' and continues to form the basis of contemporary stability paradigm.

### **Cuban Missile Crisis – A Renewed Look at Strategic Stability**

Cuban missile crisis unleashed host of new dimensions to seek strategic equilibrium by both sides. As, the previous concepts, though could avert nuclear catastrophe yet afforded incentive to use the potential of nukes to serve the state ends at the cost of testing nuclear stability. It is to this reason that, aftermath of Cuban missile crisis witnessed a multifaceted approach by the adversaries. It renewed the momentum to bring better transparency in nuclear order as testified by follow up in the shape of SALT (Strategic Arms Limitation Talks) and establishment of hot line (Brito & Intriligator, 1981). Concurrently, it forced Moscow to focus on modernizing its strategic force to meet the deficiency induced by withdrawal from Cuba.

### **Post-Cold War Construct of Strategic Stability**

End of Cold War did compromise the status of Soviet but never offered a comforting level within the realm of nuclear domain to West. USA has conceded to introduce new dimension towards meaning of strategic stability at *prima facie* through subsequent leadership in White House. Clinton's, Bush's, Obama's and recently much propagated Trump's nuclear policy continues to use "nuclear weapons to provide deterrence for itself and its allies" (Harries, 2018). Since it's an implicit perspective that "nations with which the United States must accept a stability relationship are those that, even in the wake of an attempted USA's disarming first strike, can deliver a devastating nuclear blow against the United States itself. Today and for the foreseeable future the nations that fall into this category are Russia and China" (Perry, 2007). Consequently, USA would continue to place heavy reliance over advancement in the field of nukes to undermine any notion of strategic dominance by competing states.

With the world getting averse to wars, conflicts and an unprecedented economic quest that is integrating nations into a global economy with its epic center particularly at Asia Pacific has introduced a paradigm shift in the global norms of interstate interactions. Shift from geopolitics to geo-economics and assertion made by globalization has posed challenges to the post Cold War global order. The phenomena have brought into prominence the concept of interdependence, cooperation and connectivity in turn giving rise to the dawn of multi-polarity. Global shift from West to East and inability of West to derive a meaningful conclusion of a one and half decade long military interventions have eroded the US power to influence the globe. Chinese outward confidence inspired by her economic vibrancy and emergence of rising economies of East Asia has brought the region into focus. World economic institutions enjoy the leverage to influence security policies and behaviors of recipient nations without posing any security threat. Non state actors continue to abrogate the concept of nation state thus calling for an integrated response. Interplay of trade dependence, shift in global politics, global economic organization, NGOs and threat posed by non-state actors has redefined the contours of strategic stability.

### **Defining Strategic Stability**

Traditionally strategic stability can be ascribed to deterrence, arms race and crisis stability in the region, however ideally this interpretation would be at the cost of enormous strategic contribution and realities. As stated by Quinlan, “we cannot take for granted that the Cold War example constitutes a universal template against which to analyze the South Asian situation. At one end of the spectrum, strands of stability are tied to the regional as well as global power construct and on the other diverse regional dynamics, aspirations and goals of two key stake holders” (Quinlan, 2000). Therefore, strategic stability in South Asia can be best

assimilated through identifying its major strands. However, to set the common framework, a conceptual definition of strategic stability can be best described through a common discourse of few definitional aspects of it discussed below.

- a. Elbridge Colby says that “strategic stability should be understood to mean a situation in which no party has an incentive to use nuclear weapons save for vindication of its vital interests in extreme circumstances” (Colby, 2013).
- b. Acton argued that “a stable relationship should be defined as one in which neither state perceives an incentive to change its force posture (including the use of nuclear weapons) out of concern that in a crisis its adversary might use nuclear weapons first” (Acton, Rojansky, Ford, & Colby, 2013).
- c. Axelrod says that “strategic stability results when both sides have sufficient invulnerable nuclear weapons to inflict unacceptable damage on the other side even after suffering a nuclear attack” (Axelrod, 1990).

From these definitions it can be concluded that nuclear dimension is the central idea in strategic stability framework.

### **1. Strands of Strategic Stability in South Asia**

Strands of strategic stability in South Asia are tied to the complex web of bilateral, regional and global framework. In bilateral framework India and Pakistan form the nuclear pair of South Asia and draw unanimous focus of intellectual debate pertaining to strategic stability of the region. In regional framework, other SAARC countries though are bound to share proportionate degree of cost of instability yet are unable to play any major role in strategic stability of the region. However, China being the major power in the region geared to lead the

21<sup>st</sup> century's economic initiative remains a major denominator in strategic stability calculus of the region. In global context interplay of USA's policies in the region carry significant worth in assessing strategic stability in South Asia. It is in this larger construct that strategic stability in South Asia can be best described.

Major strands of strategic stability in the region are enunciated below:

- a. **Nuclear Dimension:** The promotion of strategic stability, in nuclear dimension is linked to traditional concept of stability with following three four tenants:
  - i. **Deterrence.** Nuclear deterrence resting upon key tenets of threat perception, credibility and capability has been central factor in defining strategic stability paradigm in South Asia and has worked with relative plausibility to avert any catastrophe (Ganguly, 2008). However, Kargil episode, contrasting notion of stability instability paradox and heightened tension along the border during last decade are being treated as question mark over the effectiveness of deterrence stability (Cohen, 2013).
  - ii. **Crisis Stability.** Crisis stability implies that stability is robust during crisis that is during periods of unanticipated threats to core norms, values and interests (Ganguly & Biringer, 2001). As Glaser pointed out that "Crisis stability is high once the incentive to strike first is low" (Glaser, 2014). Crisis stability is of greater significance due to two compelling reasons in Indo-Pak scenario. First, both states had heightened tension period and a limited conflict while being in possession of nukes. Secondly, given the vulnerability and limited number can be an incentive for pre-emptive use. Moreover, growing mismatch in conventional domain as manifested by India can lead to crisis instability.
  - iii. **Arms Race Stability.** Arms race carries two major dimensions 'qualitative and quantitative' (Gray, 1971). Toby Dalton and Jaclyn Tandler are of the opinion that "the



Indo-Pakistani relationship is explained less by classic conventional or nuclear arms race models than by the asymmetries in their security strategies as reflected in the types of nuclear delivery capabilities they are developing”. Moreover, “Pakistan is building systems to deter India from conventional military operations below the nuclear threshold, while India is developing systems primarily to strengthen its strategic deterrent against China. Both states may be racing, but they are running on different tracks and chasing vastly different goals. It is always uncertain to be sure about deployed or deployable nuclear weapons, tests of nuclear missiles (those capable of carrying a nuclear payload) provide an alternative indicator of the arms race in South Asia” (Dalton & Tandler, 2012).

- iv. **Low Yield Nuclear Weapons.** These have brought to fore the question of stability in the region. The deterrent value of low yield weapons is the “confusion argument” which suggests that even if all the objections raised against these weapons are true, the weapons would still have sufficient deterrent impact precisely because of the ambiguity surrounding them. Neither the first user nor the retaliator would be able to control the course of events. Presence of Indian ‘*Prahaar*’ in the same theatre as Pakistani ‘*Nasr*’ should ideally deter both states from “crossing the Rubicon”, a point of no return that is associated to Julius Caesar famous crossing of Rubicon River (Johnson & Tierney, 2011).
- b. **Indo-Pak Specific Factors:** Leading the discussion on strategic stability in South Asia particularly in the context of Indo-Pak environment, Shaun Gregory has underscored four specific factors that he borrowed from Hagerty, who has contextualized the aforementioned factors of strategic stability in comparison to Cold War scenario (Gregory & Sultan, 2006). The four factors Gregory has focused and elaborated included,

(i) geo-political, (ii) domestic political, (iii) ethno-cultural-religious, and (iv) military issues.

- **‘Geo-political’** being the first factor of strategic stability in South Asia shares no particular similarity with Cold War ‘geo-politics’. In-fact, the main dissimilarity with that of the Cold War is a long border between Pakistan and India, which was not the case between the then Soviet and United States. Due to continental distance between Washington and Moscow brought positive tendency in the strategic stability but in case of Islamabad and New Delhi, the close proximity of their major cities with that of strategic assets is a great factor of strategic instability.
- **‘Domestic political’** discourse is of utmost importance when it comes orchestration of national narratives surrounded by political mileage. Indian occupation of Jammu and Kashmir plays high on agenda on both sides. Pakistan somehow has maintained the perspective of ‘international law’ while deliberately keeping a side from politics of rhetoric and hatred. India contrary to that has been dealing with Kashmir through force and rhetoric of ‘Hindutva’, which is a factor of enormous hatred invested to override rationality of Kashmir dispute and to secure political mileage. Moreover, the associated symbolism of nuclear weapons and Indian ambitions of great power politics with that of national-cum-international prestige and pride has fueled Pakistan’s threat perceptions. Legitimizing state terrorism through Kalbushan Yadev like spies under nuclear shadow is glaring code of ‘shacking up’ the threshold. The instability of politics, interstate conflict and threat of terrorism are a key distinct factor from classic time of nuclear stability.

- **‘Ethno-cultural-religious’** dynamics of the region are compounded with fault lines that are feeding violence and perpetual threat of instability. Both Pakistan and India are rich in experiencing shock waves of communal unrest and violence.
  - **‘Military domain’** is another facet which is continuously feeding the insecurity. The key elements along with differential factors are the application of sub-conventional warfare with that of asymmetry in conventional forces. Furthermore, lack of strategic language between the two is replaced with ‘political rhetoric’. Last but not the least, both South Asian nuclear powers are not like the Cold War superpowers, which have capability to dominate the security horizons with that of settled strategic language. That is why issues of crisis stability in South Asia are subject to international pressure and to some extreme context, is subject to intervention. These idiosyncrasies impinge heavily on the stability framework of South Asia.
- c. **Stability - Instability Paradox:** Stability-Instability paradox as identified by Glenn Snyder is “a situation where credible threats at higher level may lead to instability at lower levels” (Snyder, 1965), is linked to Indo-Pak scenario primarily due to Kargil conflict and the Indian rhetoric about Pakistan sponsoring sub-conventional threat to India. Contending interpretations do exist on the issue of Kargil however, given the maturity of Pakistani strategic intellect, subscribing to these rhetoric seems irrelevant. However, the paradox continues to serve as a *casus belli* for India to lineup diplomatic maneuvering against Pakistan.
- d. **Kashmir Issue and Territorial Disputes :** Kashmir issue continues to haunt strategic stability in South Asia. Indigenous freedom struggle against Indian occupation provides a custom-made source to India to malign Pakistan on the issue of supporting insurgency

against India. Moreover, host of concerns do exist to serve as a reason for potential conflict to include water issue, Siachin dispute and violable nature of border at places.

- e. **Internal Dynamics** :Internal dynamics of states, strategic thinking and culture continue to play a significant role in strategic stability in the region. Indian strategic elite obsessed with strategic culture leaning onto concept of greater India and global status continue to raise concerns about security in Pakistan. Moreover, fissiparous tendencies in India and internal security dynamics of Pakistan carry the reasons for bilateral skepticism.
- f. **Conventional Force Matrix**: Indian appetite to amass huge conventional force backed by Indian offensive concepts is gradually eroding the stability matrix of the region. As, nuclear deterrence not backed up by conventional military force is unlikely to yield the desired ends to the political objectives of nuclear potentials of any country. Conventional capability has direct co-relation to the strategic stability in the region, as conventional weapons capability translates into multiple layers of security and allows the escalation spiral to play out in a controlled fashion.
- g. **Terrorism, Non State Actors and Nuclear Proliferation**: Terrorism linked to religious extremism still plays to the psyche of West. The narrative is adroitly linked to nuclear proliferation to non-state actors by India in connivance with anti-Pakistan Western intellect. It not only creates misperception about safety of Pakistan's nuclear arsenals rather undermines the strategic stability of the region.
- h. **Sino-US Factor**: Tanvi Madan maintains that "today, both India and the US have relationships with China that have elements of cooperation, competition and, potentially conflict though in different degrees" (Madan, 2014). Pakistan being an indispensable

partner in Chinese economic vision and natural ally turns out to be the scarlet thread of this paradigm. USA's presence in the region turns out to be a paradox for stability, at one end it contributes to stability with its ability to influence the security competition between regional rivals; on the other it places bet on India to balance China, thus contributing to regional instability. Indo-US nuclear deal, strategic partnership and now USA efforts to get India into NSG at the cost of perpetual risk to the stability of the region are self-testifying evidences.

- i. **Contending Interpretation of Strategic Stability:** Strategic stability in South Asia is being assessed to have different meaning for Pakistan and India, as well as key global players. The strategic environment in region carry inimitable convoluted where three nuclear weapon states (China, India and Pakistan) share problems by facts of geography, history, ideological and power competition. Interplay of this complex matrix has added anecdotal dimensions to the strategic stability in South Asia.

## 2. Indian Thinking of Strategic Stability

India obsessed to seek revision in global as well as regional power balance undertook nuclear experiment. India and majority of Western block is proponent of contrasting as well as cooperative doublet in nuclear context of South Asia, 'China-Pakistan in cooperative whereas Indian-Pakistan and India-China in contrasting modes'. Indian rationale for her force modernization is based on the logic of seeking balance with China and deterring Pakistan thus offering a perfect convergence with the USA. Current strategic partnership though serves Indian aspirations in regional construct but carry significant bearing on USA's efforts in Asia Pacific. Thus it leaves an impression about more than a push by India a pull by USA. India continues to project her No First Use policy (NFU) as a sole contributor to the crisis stability in the region, however to address the concerns over arms race

stability finds refuge behind Pakistani and Chinese threat. India continues to invest on her conventional as well as strategic force to balance China and coerce Pakistan.

### 3. Pakistan's Perspective on Strategic Stability

Pakistan became a nuclear state not by choice rather as a compulsion but remained committed to restraints and advocated her policy of credible minimum deterrence to seek strategic stability in the region. Pakistan kept propagating nukes as a mean to deter war and never displayed any aspirations of hegemony. However, episodes like OBL, Dr. AQ Khan, and propagations about Pakistan's role in GWOT followed by deliberate act of targeting of many leading Taliban leaders by USA inside Pakistan complemented the Indian designs of undermining security of Pakistan's strategic assets. Growing asymmetry in conventional material, doctrinal and upward trend in strategic force by India kept Pakistan involved in *quid pro quo*. The recent developments and reshaping of strategic alliances forced Pakistan to evolve the concept of Full Spectrum Deterrence (Kristensen & Norris, 2016).

Tactical Nuclear Weapons induced a new dimension to strategic stability, whereby Pakistan projects it as mean to retain stability while India and West perceives it destabilizing. Few of the leading contribution towards real strategic stability by Pakistan include proposed 'South Asian Nuclear Weapon Free Zone' in 1972, 'bilateral nuclear test ban' in South Asia and joint declaration of South Asia as an ABM free zone. Given these credentials should Pakistan remain subject of skepticism leaves a question mark on the intent of global community to introduce stability in the region.

### Conclusion

South Asia being an integral part of global realities remains disposed to be greatly affected by this global shift. The aforementioned discussion and inquiry of perspectives on regional stability, few pertinent conclusions drawn out from the environment are:

- The rise of the Asia-Pacific region may well prove to be the single most trans-formative geo-political shift of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Global power landscape is witnessing a systematic shift from West to East. In the emerging order USA is likely to maintain her status militarily but economic rise of China and Asia are posing serious challenges to West.
- USA in an endeavor to preserve the global order is opting to contain China through an act of rebalancing and pivoting to Asia. Indian aspirations to rise beyond the horizons of region, offer an implicit convergence with USA to contain China, thus adding complexity to regional security and stability dynamics.
- Chinese economic vision based on connectivity and interdependence and Pakistan's position to act as a conduit in the form of CPEC is likely to emerge as an added thread for stability in the region.
- Terrorism and embedded disputes will continue to threaten the stability in the region. Terrorism mantra and Afghan instability will continue to serve an instrument to dissuade and deny any meaningful gains by Pakistan.
- Indian provocative conventional military doctrines backed by Western hardware support will pose serious challenge to stability in the region; consequently, putting an added strain over stability through nuclear dimension.

- India will capitalize over her relevance to West to optimize her nuclear capability under her disingenuous argument of strategic vulnerability in the region.
- Pakistan might witness a surge in concerns over safety and security of her nuclear program to undermine her overt cooperation with China, thus posing a serious security challenge to Pakistan and regional stability.



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