China and Pakistan in the Post-India-U.S. Nuclear Deal Scenario

Saira Bano*

University of Calgary, Alberta, Canada

Nuclear relations in South Asia cannot be fully analyzed without taking into account the China factor. After the May 1998 nuclear tests, a substantive amount of strategic literature has been focused on Indian and Pakistani nuclear postures and policies, respectively. However, their integral links with China in transforming South Asia’s nuclear environment remains one critical component that has not been adequately examined. Multifaceted cooperation, competition and conflict have engulfed this triangle since the India-U.S. nuclear deal. This deal has significantly increased India’s nuclear weapons capability, and hence exacerbated the security dilemma of Pakistan and China, which has important implications for the strategic stability in the region. This paper analyses the strategic implications of this deal for the nuclear triangle and argues that the nuclear triangle will remain complex with inherent risks as well as pose challenges to the region’s strategic stability. China-India-Pakistan nuclear strategies will be determined by the larger triangle of U.S.-China-India relations, which will define the politics of South Asia as well as the larger Asian landscape.

Keywords: China, Pakistan, India, United States, strategic stability

Introduction

China, India and Pakistan, wedged in a strategic triangular relationship, share a history of conflicts and border disputes. All three have nuclear weapons and necessary delivery systems with asymmetrical threat perceptions in which Pakistan’s nuclear strategy is India-centric; India’s nuclear deterrence involves both China and Pakistan; and China’s strategic calculation aims at the United States. Two sides of this triangle, China and Pakistan, share a history of hostility with the third side, namely, India. This strategic triangle is unique in a sense that all three members are nuclear powers sharing borders and longstanding animosities with one another.

India-Pakistan relations have long been cleaved by deep antagonism since independence with three wars, repeated military crises, and a costly arms race. India and Pakistan have rarely interacted in a non-hostile political sphere as a result of a historical legacy marked by the bloody upshot of India’s partition and the birth of Pakistan. In May 1998, India and Pakistan held a series of nuclear test explosions,
which marked the first step toward weaponization of South Asia with the acquisition and deployment of operationally deliverable nuclear warheads. After the 1998 nuclear tests by India, then Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee wrote a letter to then U.S. President Bill Clinton and justified the nuclear explosions with reference to the Chinese nuclear threat and its nuclear technology assistance in Pakistan’s nuclear program.1

On July 18, 2005, U.S. President George W. Bush and Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh in a joint statement announced a framework for nuclear cooperation between the two countries, which brought an end to more than three decades of sanctions against India following its 1974 nuclear test. The final agreement was signed on October 10, 2008 in which India separated its civilian and military nuclear program, and its civilian program would receive the nuclear energy cooperation under IAEA safeguards. India is getting the fissile material for its civilian nuclear program from the international market and can exclusively divert its domestic uranium reserves for its nuclear weapons program.

The India-U.S. nuclear deal is very significant to Beijing and Islamabad for the reason that it is perceived as a part of the U.S. grand strategy of China’s containment; and for Pakistan, it can deteriorate deterrence capabilities against India and can tilt the balance of power in favor of India. After the deal, China agreed to sign a nuclear agreement with Pakistan in which China committed to provide two nuclear reactors at Chasma. Meanwhile, the India-U.S. nuclear deal has not only accelerated the arms race in South Asia, but also has generated negative consequences for strategic stability in the region. Therefore, the paper intends to explore how and to what extent this deal has affected the nuclear triangle and what measures China and Pakistan are taking to counter the increasing nuclear capability of India.

The paper is divided into five sections: The first section describes the triangular nuclear relationship among China, India and Pakistan and how these three countries have constituted a nuclear strategic triangle. The second section explains the India-U.S. civilian nuclear agreement and how it has increased India’s nuclear weapons program. The third section analyzes China’s response to the deal and how China is wooing India to prevent its further thrust into the U.S. sphere. The fourth section explores the reaction of Pakistan to this deal and measures Pakistan is taking to narrow its strategic gap vis-à-vis India. The fifth section offers a conclusion. This paper argues that the deal has exacerbated the security dilemma in the triangular relations and has important implications for the strategic stability of the region.

**China-India-Pakistan Nuclear Triangle**

An analysis of nuclear relations between India and Pakistan is incomplete without taking into account the Chinese factor. China figures prominently in the nuclear narrative of South Asia. China, India, and Pakistan have fought wars against one another—wars that convinced small states to seek nuclear weapon against conventionally stronger enemies. At the root of their problems lie continued mutual suspicions flowing from their historical experiences of territorial disputes and resultant wars and tensions. In this triangle, China and Pakistan have cooperative relations, but both have territorial disputes and adversarial relations with India.