

Prospects of and Challenges to Arms Control in South Asia: A Pakistani Perspective

by Sonia Naz

The arms control stability between Pakistan and India is currently on wobbly grounds due to the increasing development of modern weaponry in South Asia. The already tense situation is intensified by the arms race, as well as by the enforcement of provocative military strategies, actions and speeches.¹ In 2019, an attempted Indian surgical strike on Pakistan after the Pulwama attack² and annexation of Indian-occupied Kashmir into the

Indian Union by annulling article 370 of the Indian constitution further heightened tensions between the two countries. There is a rising concern that issues such as Kashmir, cross-border terrorism and disputes over shared management of watercourses could escalate into a conventional or even a nuclear war.³

The modernisation of militaries and expansion of nuclear weapons arsenals seem to be a distinguishing feature of both countries, which is arguably the result of the mutual and wider regional threats that they perceive.⁴ The emerging realities of competition between the US and China, and China and India, have made the strategic

¹ Sitara Noor, "Strategic Stability in South Asia: The Evolving Challenges and Potential Opportunities for India and Pakistan", in *Strategic Studies*, Vol. 43, No. 1 (2023), p. 64-94, <https://doi.org/10.53532/ss.043.01.00272>.

² On 14 February 2019, a 19-year-old young Kashmiri resident from the Indian Occupied Kashmir (IoK) blew himself up killing more than 40 personnel of India's Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF). Within hours, India blamed Jaish-e-Muhammad, a militant group banned in Pakistan, and accused Pakistan of harbouring the terrorists. Pakistan denied its involvement and offered full cooperation to investigate the incident and bring to justice the perpetrators of the suicide attack. See Adil Sultan, "Pulwama' Crisis: Causes, Implications, and Lessons for the Future", in *Strafasia*, 10 April, 2019, <https://strafasia.com/pulwama-crisis-causes-implications-and-lessons-for-the-future>.

³ Mario E. Carranza, *India Pakistan Nuclear Diplomacy. Constructivism and the Prospects for Nuclear Arms Control and Disarmament in South Asia*, London, Rowman & Littlefield, 2016.

⁴ Abeer Iftikhar Tahirkheli, "India's Strategic Force Modernization and Its Implications on Strategic Environment of Pakistan", in *Strategic Thought*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (2022), p. 155-171, <https://strategicthought.ndu.edu.pk/site/article/view/83>; Mario E. Carranza, *India Pakistan Nuclear Diplomacy*, cit.

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environment very complex,⁵ which has diminished dramatically the prospects of arms control.⁶ Indeed, China's rise fuels Indian insecurity, while, in turn, India's hegemonic goals and dominance make Pakistan insecure.⁷ Amidst these tensions, in 2019, Indian Defence Minister Rajnath Singh clearly stated that Indian No First Use nuclear policy can change into First Use.⁸

National interests and arms control

In the past, Pakistan offered many arms control proposals to India – for instance, the Regional Test Ban Agreement (1987) and a South Asia Zero Missile Zone (1994) – to halt the arms race in South Asia,⁹ but New Delhi rejected them, mainly due to its quest for a regional and potentially global power status on an equal footing with China. The most significant proposals pertained to the non-deployment of ballistic

missiles, the non-operationalisation of nuclear-capable missile systems and a suspension on the acquisition or deployment of anti-ballistic missiles systems.

Islamabad endorses arms control agreements because it is in the country's interest due to its fragile economy, which poses a challenge to addressing national security threats.¹⁰ However, arms control at the regional level cannot be achieved without New Delhi's involvement. Indeed, Pakistan has not signed the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) because India has not signed it either.¹¹ In a similar vein, Pakistan has not supported the Fissile Material Cut-off Treaty (FMCT) because it does not include existing fissile material stockpiles,¹² and India has more stockpiles than Pakistan.¹³ Without the inclusion of existing fissile material, FMCT would go to Pakistan's detriment because it would increase the asymmetry with India.

In addition, due to great powers' strategic interests, India has been

⁵ Rizwana Abbasi and Zafar Khan, *Nuclear Deterrence in South Asia. New Technologies and Challenges to Sustainable Peace*, London/New York, Routledge, 2020.

⁶ Aamna Rafiq, "Militarisation of Artificial Intelligence and Future of Arms Control in South Asia", in *Strategic Studies*, Vol. 42, No. 2 (Summer 2021), p. 49-52, <https://issi.org.pk/?p=30770>.

⁷ Feroz Hassan Khan, "Strategic Risk Management in Southern Asia", in *Journal for Peace and Nuclear Disarmament*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (2022), p. 369-393, <https://doi.org/10.1080/25751654.2022.2136878>.

⁸ Sudhi Ranjan Sen and Rezaul H Laskar, "Rajnath Singh's Hint on 'No First Use' Change Is Message to Pakistan", in *The Hindustan Times*, 16 June 2020, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/story-kzEZhsWPwx0dnPefQTKZ3L.html>.

⁹ Sannia Abdullah, "Pakistan and the Non-proliferation Regime", in Naeem Salik (ed.), *Nuclear Pakistan. Seeking Security and Stability*, Lahore, University of Lahore Press, 2018, p. 152-153, <https://ciss.org.pk/PDFs/Nuclear-Pakistan.pdf>.

¹⁰ Zafar Nawaz Jaspal, "Arms Control: Risk Reduction Measures Between India and Pakistan", in *SASSU Research Papers*, No. 1 (June 2005), <https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/99910/RP%20No%2001.pdf>; Iftikhar A. Qureshi and Hassan Jalil Shah, "Deteriorating Economic Conditions and Their Impact on National Security", in *ISSRA Papers*, Vol. 11, No. 2 (2019), p. 29-44, <https://issrapapers.ndu.edu.pk/site/article/view/20>.

¹¹ Ibid.; Sannia Abdullah, "Pakistan and the Non-proliferation Regime", cit., p. 153-154.

¹² Sannia Abdullah, "Pakistan and the Non-proliferation Regime", cit., p. 158-160.

¹³ Tom Z. Collina and Daniel Horner, "The South Asian Nuclear Balance: An Interview with Pakistani Ambassador to the CD Zamir Akram", in *Arms Control Today*, Vol. 41, No. 10 (December 2011), p. 8-13, <https://www.armscontrol.org/node/5163>.

granted a unique position in the current nonproliferation regime,¹⁴ having received a special waiver by the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) in 2008.¹⁵ India is the only state in the world that is not a party to the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) but is *de facto* recognised as a nuclear weapon state. India's special position arguably challenges the overall credibility of the nonproliferation regime.¹⁶

As mentioned, wider strategic interests have a great bearing on this situation. Indeed, India is a strategic partner of the US and a member – along with the US, Australia and Japan – of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue against China in the Asia-Pacific region. Besides this, India signed many military modernisation agreements with the US, such as the Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA) and Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (BECA). In fact, India's plan is to involve Russia and the US to modernise its military, in order to balance the growing military power of China and establish hegemony in South Asia.¹⁷ Consequently, Pakistan

needs to adopt measures in order to maintain strategic parity with India and prevent war in the region.¹⁸

The challenges of modern technologies

There is a real risk of a nuclear-level escalation in South Asia due to the incorporation/inclusion of new and emerging technologies – including ballistic missile defence (BMD) systems and hypersonic missiles¹⁹ – in the respective militaries of Pakistan and India. Recent developments in the domain of artificial intelligence (AI) may especially affect the strategic stability of the region. Pakistan and India, as well as China, are exploring the use of AI in areas of strategic importance, such as command and control, early-caution, BMD, intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) systems; unmanned underwater vehicles (UUVs) and unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs); and electronic and cyber warfare. AI allows performing high-level computing tasks with speed and precision that cannot be accomplished through other sources.²⁰ A nontraditional attack in the form of a cyber-attack, or a conventional

¹⁴ Feroz Hassan Khan, "Prospects for Indian and Pakistani Arms Control and Confidence-Building Measures", in *Naval War College Review*, Vol. 63, No. 3 (Summer 2010), Article 8, <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol63/iss3/8>.

¹⁵ Zafar Nawaz Jaspal, "Contemporary Nuclear Debates", in Naeem Salik (ed.), *Nuclear Pakistan. Seeking Security and Stability*, Lahore, University of Lahore Press, 2018, p. 229, <https://ciss.org.pk/PDFs/Nuclear-Pakistan.pdf>.

¹⁶ Feroz Hassan Khan, "Prospects for Indian and Pakistani Arms Control", cit., p. 13.

¹⁷ Mujib Mashal and Karan Deep Singh, "India and Russia Expand Defense Ties, Despite Prospect of U.S. Sanctions", in *The New York Times*, 6 December 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/06/world/asia/india-russia-missile-defense-deal.html>.

[com/2021/12/06/world/asia/india-russia-missile-defense-deal.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/06/world/asia/india-russia-missile-defense-deal.html).

¹⁸ Rizwana Abbasi and Zafar Khan, *Nuclear Deterrence in South Asia*, cit.

¹⁹ Zafar Nawaz Jaspal, "The Missile Race Is Destabilizing South Asia's Strategic Environment", in *Arab News*, 6 November 2021, <https://arab.news/bk48s>.

²⁰ Sam Guthrie, "Conventional and Nuclear Applications of Artificial Intelligence: A Brief Examination of India and Pakistan", in Sam Dudin and Chelsey Wiley (eds), *The 2019 UK PONI Papers*, London, Royal United Services Institute (RUSI), December 2019, p. 39-42, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep37409.10>.

attack with AI integration in weapons, can damage the nuclear capabilities of a state by undermining the second-strike capability.²¹ New technologies pose new threats: in 2019, for example, India's largest reactor Kudankulam faced a cyber-attack which led to the theft of data.²²

Since developments in emerging technologies are very fast and it is very difficult to regulate these technologies due to their speed and efficacy,²³ the militarisation of AI would ultimately enhance the position of powerful states, with weaker states being at pains to seek parity with them. Widespread application of AI to military affairs would thus increase the imbalance between Pakistan and India (due to Indian heavy investment in AI) and could also hinder the prospects of arms control. India – the third-largest military spender in the world, with an allocation of 72.6 billion US dollars for defence for 2023–24²⁴ – is indeed investing a considerable amount of financial resources in AI. For example, New Delhi has imported technologies such as 100 Heron TPUAVs from Israel Aerospace Industries for the promotion

of indigenous production in 2020.²⁵ Against this backdrop, Pakistan is also expanding its own military to enhance its security.²⁶

Looking ahead

Relations between Pakistan and India are currently characterised by mistrust, mutual threats, enmity and misperceptions. Therefore, there is an urgent need to find ways for arms control talks in order to regulate the nuclear behaviour of both countries. Both are developing countries and their economies are not as robust as those of the US and China; thus, arms control would play a vital role in reducing their defence budgets and enabling them to invest their financial resources in more pressing sectors, such as the energy one.

In the current scenario, great powers are unlikely to be able to play a leading role in arms control in South Asia: Russia is engaged in the war against Ukraine, while the US is focused on containing the emerging power of China through QUAD and AUKUS in the Asia Pacific. Hence, there is a pressing need for the governments of Pakistan and India and their political leaders to take the initiative and resume the peace negotiation process to limit the development of weapons and new military technologies. What is ultimately at stake is the peace and stability of South Asia.

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²¹ Abdul Moiz Khan, "Emerging Technologies and the Nuclear Responsibilities Approach", in *BASIC Analysis*, 14 February 2022, <https://wp.me/p9AKJD-3IE>.

²² Palwasha Khan, "Building a Bilateral Framework for Cyber Security in South Asia", in *South Asian Voices*, 12 November 2021, <https://www.stimson.org/?p=48238>.

²³ Ghazala Yasmin Jalil, *Emerging Technologies and their Impact on Strategic Stability in South Asia*, ISSI Seminar Report, 12 March 2020, <https://issi.org.pk/?p=25819>.

²⁴ Sitara Noor, "Strategic Stability in South Asia", cit., p. 75.

²⁵ Feroz Hassan Khan, "Strategic Risk Management in Southern Asia", cit., p. 379-382.

²⁶ Aamna Rafiq, "Militarisation of Artificial Intelligence and Future of Arms Control in South Asia", cit., p. 54.

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