THE CHINA-INDIA-PAKISTAN NUCLEAR TRIANGLE: A POST-INDIA-US NUCLEAR DEAL SCENARIO
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2015
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Section I

Introduction

The strategic relations between China, India and Pakistan constitute a unique nuclear triangle in which the parties share a history of conflicts and border disputes. All three have nuclear weapons and necessary delivery systems, but with differing threat perceptions: 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 that is India. This nuclear triangle is unique in the sense that all three members are nuclear powers who share borders and longstanding animosities. The 2005 Indo-US nuclear agreement deal exacerbated the resultant security dilemma and has important implications for the nuclear triangle and the stability of the region. This study addresses the question: How and to what extent has the Indo-US nuclear deal affected the China-India-Pakistan nuclear triangle?

Two earlier nuclear triangles - the US-Europe (UK and France)-USSR and the US-USSR-China one - provide a framework to analyse how these nuclear triangles are different from each other and what similar behaviours can be pointed out. One thing that seems to be in common is the fear that a small nuclear power might trigger a war between other members of the triangle. France and China in the earlier nuclear triangles had adopted policies that could have initiated war between the US and the USSR. Similarly, its nuclear deterrent has given Pakistan the confidence to carry out limited war under the nuclear shadow, which has the potential of a crisis escalation that might drive China to intervene. The Indo-US nuclear deal has exacerbated the precarious security situation in the region, leading China and
Pakistan to take counter measures detrimental to regional strategic stability.

On 18 July 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. It took more than three years to sign the final agreement, as it had to go through several complex stages, including amendment of US domestic law, a civil-military separation plan in India, an India-IAEA (International Atomic Energy Agency) safeguards agreement and the granting of an exemption for India by the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG). India is the only country which is not a member of the NPT (Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty) and is officially allowed to have nuclear commerce with the NSG members.

One Chinese expert has pointed out that the Indo-US deal could help India expand its nuclear arsenal. India now has access to international fuel for its civilian reactors and can use domestic uranium fuel for its nuclear weapons program. The transfer of advanced defence technology would also help India to further advance its missile program. He also estimated that India could produce 50 nuclear warheads per year instead of the previous level of 6-10 warheads (Fang 2013: 46). The Chinese suspected Washington’s strategic motivation for the Indo-US nuclear deal. Cheng Ruisheng, a former Chinese Ambassador to India, argued that the main reason for the deal is the ‘China factor’ (Ruisheng 2008: 23). The Indo-US strategic partnership is meant to ‘restrict China’s influence’ in Asia (Ying 2007: 12). The deal has helped to reduce the strategic gap between China and India. For China, India’s growing nuclear deterrent is not a threat for now as Beijing’s overall nuclear forces remain greater than New Delhi’s.
What worries China is the growing India-US convergence in dealing with China (Fang 2013: 46).

Pakistan's response to the nuclear agreement was particularly strong due to its history of conflict with India. Zamir Akram, Pakistan’s ambassador at the Conference on Disarmament (CD), declared that it would disturb strategic stability in South Asia, and on that basis blocked the start of negotiations on the FMCT (Fissile Material Cut-off Treaty) (Akram 2010). The Pakistan National Command Authority (NCA), which is responsible for nuclear weapons, warned that India's NSG membership would also ‘destabilize the security environment in South Asia’ and ‘Pakistan will be forced to take measures to ensure the credibility of its deterrence’ (Dawn 2011). It accelerated its efforts to take such measures, both internally and externally, to catch up to India's nuclear capacity. Internally, Pakistan is increasing the production of enriched uranium and plutonium for weapons. It is reported that the rapid increase of Pakistan's nuclear stockpiles has placed it in fifth position in nuclear arms possession (Sanger & Schmitt 2011). Pakistan’s NCA also altered its nuclear strategy from credible minimum deterrence to full spectrum deterrence and argued ‘Pakistan would not remain oblivious to evolving security dynamics in South Asia and would maintain a full spectrum deterrence capability to deter all forms of aggression’ (Syed 2013).

Externally, Pakistan has demanded a similar nuclear deal, but it has received a non-committal response from the United States (Kimball 2010). Frustrated with India's access to the global nuclear market, Pakistan signed a nuclear agreement with China in which China committed to provide two nuclear reactors in apparent violation of NSG guidelines. China justified the agreement by noting a ‘grandfather’ provision, but the US argued that in 2004, when China joined the NSG, no such commitment
was reported (Horner 2010). After the India waiver, the NSG did not condemn the Chinese deal with Pakistan. As critics foresaw correctly, the US-India deal is sending precisely the wrong message: ’If America can bend the rules for India, then China can break them for Pakistan’ (Economist 2010). China and Pakistan also reached a formal agreement to construct a fourth nuclear reactor at Chashma (Gertz 2013).

To analyse the implications of the Indo-US nuclear deal this study will analyse changes in the nuclear doctrines and strategies of the nuclear triangle. In this regard nuclear doctrines, official statements at international and national forums, press releases and nuclear agreements will be examined to analyse the implications for the region. This study has analysed the creation and content of the Indo-US Nuclear Deal (India MEA 2007), the Hyde Act (U.S. GPO 2006) the NSG waiver for India (NSG 2008), the IAEA-India Safeguards Agreement (IAEA 2008), and the Indo-US Reprocessing Agreement (India DAE 2010), among other documents (e.g. official statements, testimony and press releases – see references). Developments since 2005 when the framework was announced give empirical material to look at actual effects on strategic calculations of both China and Pakistan. Apart from these primary sources, this study will also rely on secondary data in which nuclear experts and academics have argued either in favour or against the deal and investigated the implications for either Pakistan or China.

This study proceeds through two sections. Section I introduces the problem, examining the literature on complex nuclear triangle systems and how earlier triangles were different from and similar to the China-India-Pakistan nuclear triangle. Particular attention has been given to the nuclear policies of the weaker state of the triangles. This section also examines and assesses the contents and creation of the India-US nuclear deal.
Section II analyzes Sino-India relations in the post-India-US nuclear deal and what measures Beijing is taking to counter the growing influence of Washington in Indian strategic calculations. This section highlights India-Pakistan strategic relations and Pakistan’s security concerns in the wake of the deal and the measures Pakistan is taking to mitigate that sense of insecurity. This section also offers the conclusion.

The nuclear triangle model is useful in considering the complex and dynamic deterrence picture in the region and helps to point out the best possible measures to mitigate the nuclear dangers. India’s efforts to achieve some level of strategic parity with China, motivates Pakistan’s nuclear developments to close the perceived deterrence gaps, and to seek closer relations with China to balance perceived threats from India. The Indo-US nuclear deal has further aggravated this process. This study contributes to an assessment of the Indo-US agreement on regional dynamics by exploring the degree to which that agreement challenges the stability of the region. Pakistan’s demand for a similar arrangement, its increased production of fissile material, and the change from minimum credible deterrence to full spectrum deterrence, as well as its cooperation with China have important implications for the China-India-Pakistan nuclear triangle and stability in the region.
The China-India-Pakistan nuclear triangle has the potential for crisis escalation due to the asymmetrical relationships among its members. The comparison of this nuclear triangle with two earlier triangles, the US-Europe (France/Britain)-USSR and the US-China-USSR, reveals that weak members of the triangle are likely to initiate a crisis, which can potentially force the involvement of the other two members of the triangle. In the first two nuclear triangles, the United States gave security assurances to Western Europe and China. In the China-India-Pakistan triangle, China’s position is ambiguous and it has avoided giving explicit security guarantees to Pakistan in the case of an Indian military attack. This can cause misperceptions on the part of both Pakistan and India. Pakistan might expect that China would help and India might expect that Beijing would not intervene. Multifaceted cooperation, competition, and conflict have engulfed this triangle since the India-US nuclear deal was concluded. This deal has significantly increased India’s potential nuclear weapons capability and thus has exacerbated the security dilemma of Pakistan and China. This has important implications for strategic stability in the region. This paper analyses the strategic implications of this deal for the nuclear triangle and argues that the deal has aggravated the perceived insecurity of Pakistan, which has increased Islamabad’s reliance on nuclear weapons. This could lead to a breakdown in the strategic stability of the triangle. Therefore, it is in the interest of the international community to engage nuclear Pakistan constructively.

Saira Bano is a PhD Candidate at the Centre for Military and Strategic Studies (CMSS), University of Calgary. Her research focuses on International Relations Theories and the nuclear nonproliferation regime. She has won several academic and research awards. She was awarded the prestigious Joseph-Armand Bombardier Canada Graduate Scholarship Doctoral by SSHRC (Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council) and awarded the Graduate Research Award by the Simons Foundation.