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**STRATEGIC STABILITY ON THE ANVIL: INDIA-PAKISTAN-CHINA  
TRIANGLE**

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CPEC, CBMs.**

**Abstract:**

In the backdrop of persistent tensions between China and India, and India and Pakistan, strategic stability in South Asia is jeopardized. The unresolved issues that brittle regional strategic stability, such as Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) dispute, nuclear and conventional arms race, and quadrilateral balancing relation between the US, China, India and Pakistan mar India-Pakistan relations. Out of these issues, J&K remains the central point of conflict to the acrimonious relationship between India and Pakistan. It has repeatedly triggered conventional escalations between the two. Additionally, India also claims part of the Aksai Chin - a region administered by China - and eastern portion of the larger J&K which has been the subject of a dispute between India and China since the late 1950s. In this context, variables undermining the prospects for long term peace - among others - include growing mutual mistrust, low-intensity conflicts (LICs), increasing conventional asymmetries, nuclear unrest, rapid advancement in weapon technologies, growing size of nuclear arsenals, doctrinal mismatch, and above all, bilateral jams in cooperation towards a stable region. China has emerged as a power balancer in South Asia particularly during the Pulwama Incident. It is continuously echoing with Pakistan's stance on J&K, equally voicing concerns on Indian belligerent behaviour and actions in J&K. In the sequel, the actionable recommendation can be instrumental in achieving greater stability, which is essential for South Asian peace.

**Introduction:**

The South Asian strategic stability swings due to friction between two nuclear neighbours - India and Pakistan. They not only share a volatile border, their deterrence measures remain under stress because of enduring bilateral tensions and territorial disputes including Jammu and Kashmir (J&K). Strategic stability between them has experienced narrow escape with escalation ladder of the conflict going up from Kargil in 1999 to Balakot in 2019. In this setting, the application of force

has become a preferred policy option versus negotiations and dialogue. This fragile security situation induced with arms race and force posturing is leading to strategic instability. India and Pakistan cannot disown nuclear weapons; however, it is gravely significant to maintain strategic stability at the lowest possible level. Currently, the security situation is precarious not for India and Pakistan but also for the US and China, which have long viewed regional crises with concern while having their strategic interests in the region and playing a mediating role sometimes. As compare to the US, the role of China in escalation control has not been significant owing to the kind of alliance it has with Pakistan.<sup>1</sup>This paper is aimed not only at defining strategic stability, examining factors causing instability from domestic and regional perspectives but also tries to find answers to questions related to the nature and impact of Chinese engagement in South Asian strategic stability and prospects of Chinese role to stabilize the strategic environment.

### **1. Strategic Stability – Defining the Concept:**

Strategic stability refers to ensuring the safety, security, and survivability of nuclear weapons under all conditions—in normal as well as crisis situation.<sup>2</sup> It assumes that states are confident in their abilities that adversary states would not undermine their nuclear deterrent capacities and perceives a state of balance between two adversaries even though there may not be parity between them. Instability will occur if either of the adversaries is ready to risk changing this state of balance and prepared to escalate without fear of consequences.<sup>3</sup> For optimal deterrence, crisis stability must be ensured. In light of their increasing arsenals and diametrically opposed ideologies, the two superpowers of the Cold War tried to create the modus vivendi which undermined each other's aspirations for world domination, giving birth to the term of strategic stability. Therefore, the possibility of a surprised nuclear attack by the former Soviet Union with possibly catastrophic consequences was one of the major concerns for the political and strategy sectors in the United States. Thomas Scheber writes in *Strategic Stability: Time for a Reality Check* that “Perhaps more than any other issue, the threat of a surprise attack was the catalyst to the line of thinking that ultimately led to the concept of strategic stability.”<sup>4</sup>The fundamental objective was to keep a bipolar war stable, by ensuring that each party had a genuine capability for striking back after the opponent's first disarmament hit. The aim was to remove the opportunity to obtain a strategic advantage at a future meeting by removing the desire to do so.

The concept of strategic stability was created and accepted since the nature of the dispute between the two primary players was primarily strategic in character. Taking into account the need to protect Europe against potential Soviet threats or domination, the concept of maintaining conventional balance has always been considered; the debate has always shifted, however, from operational to strategic dissuasion, with the emphasis on nuclear weapons alone, as conventional wars are increasingly considered unimaginable. The overall agreement and understanding of issues relating to the proliferation of weapons and vector technologies, the transparency of the strategic

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<sup>1</sup>Moeed Yousaf, “Banking on an Outsider: Implications for Escalation Control in South Asia”, *Arms Control Association*, available at [http://www.armscontrol.org/act/2011\\_06/Yusuf](http://www.armscontrol.org/act/2011_06/Yusuf) (accessed on April 4, 2021)

<sup>2</sup>Christopher F Chyba, "New Technologies and Strategic Stability", *Dædalus* 149, No. 2 (2020): 150-170.

<sup>3</sup>Dmitri Trenin, "Stability amid Strategic Deregulation: Managing the End of Nuclear Arms Control", *The Washington Quarterly* 43, No. 3 (2020): 161-175.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas Scheber, “Strategic Stability: Time for a Reality Check”, *International Journal* 63, No. 4 (December 2008): 893–915.

foundations that encourage nuclear programmes, and most importantly, the fissile material control, which were all discussed, contributed to bilateral discussions about the importance of maintaining a strategic equilibrium.<sup>5</sup>

With the end of the Cold War and the emergence of new geopolitical, technical and military conditions, the concept of strategic stability has started to expand to include new challenges, such as nuclear proliferation, new missile technologies, ballistic missile defence development, rapid global strike systems and, ultimately, the deployment of artificial weapons.

Firstly, this term was referred to as the absence of capabilities of any state to engage in the first nuclear attack. However, during the Cold War, the term "strategic stability" was linked with a larger geostrategic framework, particularly arms control. Due to the discourse on arms limitation and the prevailing geostrategic realities, "strategic stability" is conceptually developed in three broad ways: in its narrowest sense, it involves the absence primarily of incentives to use nuclear weapons (crisis stability) and in its broadest sense the absence of armed conflict.<sup>6</sup>

### **Theoretical Framework:**

Stability-Instability Paradox is an off-shoot of Structural/Neo-realism, which concedes that the global structure is anarchic due to the unavailability of supreme authority. In such a case, states behave rationally because of their concerns over securitization. It is the condition of the anarchical structure that coerces states to maximize or minimize their security.<sup>7</sup> Structural Realism also puts forward two assumptions: Defensive and Offensive realism. Defensive Realism assumes that states tend to secure themselves from external threats and do not support wars. On the contrary, Offensive Realism believes that states are always in urge to maximize power to increase their hold and benefit the status-quo.<sup>8</sup> According to John Mearsheimer in *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, "great powers recognize that the best way to ensure their security is to achieve hegemony now, thus eliminating any possibility of a challenge by another great power. Only a misguided state would pass up an opportunity to be the hegemon in the system because it thought it already had sufficient power to survive."<sup>9</sup> Defensive Realism refers to relative gains, whereas Offensive Realism supports absolute gains. Hence, in the context of the stability-instability paradox, states depend on self-help and accordingly focus on minimizing or maximizing their security. Historically, the acquisition of nuclear technology is seen as a liberator from external threats though it increases non-conventional threats.<sup>10</sup> In the case of India and Pakistan, the rivalry has been there since the partition until along with other issues and boundary disputes, an agreement has not been reached regarding the J&K dispute involving neighbouring nations, India and Pakistan, gradually fostering

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<sup>5</sup>Zeeshan Hayat and Tanzeela Khalil, "Great Power Competition and Global Strategic Stability", *CISS Insight*, Journal 8, No. 1 (2020): 1-27.

<sup>6</sup> Glenn Herald Synder, *Deterrence and Defense* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961), 226.

<sup>7</sup> Kenneth N Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (California, Berkley: Wesley Series in Political Science, 1979).

<sup>8</sup>T. Hardeman, "The Development of India and Pakistan's Nuclear Strategy", Master's Thesis, 2020, accessed December 23, 2020, <http://dspace.library.uu.nl/handle/1874/399150>

<sup>9</sup> John Mearsheimer, *Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2014), 35.

<sup>10</sup>Thomas C. Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966).

new concerns such as the arms race.<sup>11</sup> Both India and Pakistan perceive the threat of nuclear war imminent and, that is why; neither state has successfully agreed on arms control framework.

Stability-Instability Paradox denotes that states having possession of nuclear capabilities do not engage in massive warfare rather fight Low Intensity Conflict (LICs). In International Relations, Stability-Instability Paradox is viewed in the context of nuclear capabilities. States possessing nuclear capabilities are credible to defend their homelands from adversaries or any major conflict but remain engaged in LICs due to their sheer confidence in nuclear weapons.<sup>12</sup>

## **2. Stability-Instability Paradox in South Asia:**

South Asia is a region of enormous strategic significance in the evolving geopolitical structure. However, India and Pakistan have been arch-rivals since their inception. They have been engaged in almost four direct wars and the terms between them have never been optimum. A history of troubled relations between India and Pakistan – which led to the nuclearization of the region - is as followed:

- The ties between India and Pakistan have been tough since the British broke up the Indian sub-continent into two nations, India and Pakistan. As both governments struggled to gain control of Jammu and Kashmir, the area of the Muslim majority, events culminated in the first full-blown conflict between them over J&K. In 1947, the UNSC passed a resolution calling for a referendum on the future of Kashmir after India submitted the Kashmir issue to the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). The war ended with a cessation of fire mediated by the United Nations and a cessation of fire divided J&K basically, with all of the forces controlling sections of the state.
- • In 1965, after several attempts to settle the Kashmir problem and de-escalate the tensions, the two countries fought their second war over the disputed area. The brief battle ended with another UN ceasefire and the two parties were allowed to return to their previous positions.
- In 1971, for the third time, India and Pakistan went to war, this time over the East Pakistan province. The conflict led to the defeat of Pakistan and the founding of Bangladesh. The leaders from both nations gathered in the Indian hill town of Simla after Pakistan's capitulation, where they signed a peace agreement that ended the war. The Jammu and Kashmir Control Line (LoC) was proclaimed the cessation of firing, and the two sides decided to resolve the problem via negotiations.
- The two neighbours, both nuclear powers, engaged in armed conflict after rebellions from across the Line of Control (LoC) took control of key strategic sites in the Indian-administered Jammu and Kashmir in 1999. India accused Pakistan of being complicit. Diplomatic gains from a historic conference in Lahore between the Prime Ministers of India and Pakistan were squandered, and diplomatic relations broke out between the two nations.
- • After a 2001 terrorist attack on the Indian Parliament, tensions reached an all-time high between the two countries. India blamed the attack on terrorist organisations based in

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<sup>11</sup>Devin T. Hagerty, "Deterrence Stability in South Asia Today," *Nuclear Weapons and Deterrence Stability in South Asia*, Palgrave Pivot (2020): 67-107.

<sup>12</sup>Rajesh Rajagopalan, "What Stability-Instability Paradox? Subnational Conflicts and the Nuclear Risk in South Asia", *SASSU Research Paper 4* (2006): 5.

Pakistan and deployed soldiers in retaliation to Pakistan's borders. Islamabad reacted in kind. Following international mediation, the impasse ended. In 2003, the parties arrived to an agreement on a ceasefire along the control lines. Although the truce remains in force, both countries blame each other for the occasional breaches.

- • After a series of terrorist attacks in Mumbai, India's financial centre, all diplomatic ties with Pakistan were interrupted in 2008. India claimed the attacks were the responsibility of Pakistan but the Indian allegation was disputed in Pakistan.
- • The Indian military's attack in 2016 led to the deaths of 19 soldiers, ending the two nations' efforts to resume talks. Surgical strikes on alleged Pakistani terrorist camps were undertaken by India in retaliation. On the other side, Pakistan disputed India's claims.
- • In 2019 India conducted aerial strikes against an allegedly destroyed Jaish-e-Mohammed terror facility in Pakistan's Balakot. Pakistan claimed a day later to have shot down two Indian fighter planes.

Since both the states have acquired the status of nuclear weapon states (NWS), their relations are transformed from direct confrontations to indirect one. The anti-Pakistan sentiments run deep in India and have always been aroused during every Indian election campaign. A hype of hate against Pakistan has also been witnessed in the Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) government.<sup>13</sup> BJP's election campaign was clearly reflected as anti-Pakistan, which has already been visible in India's policies, i.e., aggressive Cold Start Doctrine (CSD), insurgencies in one of Pakistan's provinces - Balochistan- attempts to derail Afghan Peace Process, and revoking Article 370 in J&K. Though nuclear deterrence has acted as prevention from any direct conflict between two states, threats like cyber warfare (5th Generation Warfare) and territorial disputes are enough to cause instability in the region.<sup>14</sup> Over the time, evolution and termination of different crises between Pakistan and India demonstrate that stability-instability paradox has been steadfast though in those crises where situation escalated to limited conventional war, both parties showed considerable restraint, restricted to particular front and not climbing the escalation ladder particularly in Kargil War.<sup>15</sup> Thus, it is spot-on to mention according to many experts on the subject that though nuclear deterrence has played a role in creating conventional stability but imbalance and instability in non-conventional grounds. Such views can be supported by a realist perspective.<sup>16</sup>

### **Strategic Instabilities and Rising Risks in the Region:**

South Asia is known as one of the most volatile regions of the globe. Among eight countries of South Asia, Pakistan and India share an arduous rivalry since 1947. The region's smaller countries are trapped in the diplomatic crossfire between India and Pakistan's tussle over J&K. The region is also a center of many traditional and non-traditional security threats. India-Pakistan nuclear arms race is also complicated by China's role as a rival and US role as a facilitator to India. So, the region is host to dangers of a nuclear triangle between China, India and Pakistan. Out of these three, only China is an acknowledged member of the elite club of Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty

<sup>13</sup> Chandrakala Meena et al., *Dynamic Stability of Complex Networks* (Cornell University, arXiv preprint arXiv:2007).

<sup>14</sup> Ghulam Murtaza Pitafi, "Stability-instability Paradox and Pakistan-India Relations under Prime Minister Narendra Modi – 2014," *Journal of Indian Studies* 6, No. 1 (2020): 69-78.

<sup>15</sup> Nasim Zehra, *From Kargil to the Coup: Events that shook Pakistan*, (Lahore: Sang-e-Meel Publications, 2018), p. 17.

<sup>16</sup> Michael Krepon, "The Stability-Instability Paradox, Misperception, and Escalation Control in South Asia", *Prospects for Peace in South Asia* (2003): 261-279.

(NPT). India signed a nuclear deal with US that gave it recognition as a nuclear power state on various levels and regimes, while Pakistan is yet to be recognized by these regimes as a de-jure nuclear state. The nuclear technology possession by India and Pakistan makes the region highly volatile because of their extremely unstable relations as Stephen P. Cohen states that “the future use of nuclear weapons by India and Pakistan is impossible to predict with any confidence.”<sup>17</sup> South Asian nuclearization has also changed the security dynamics of the globe<sup>18</sup> because of countries’ motives to advanced weapon systems and technologies. This makes India and Pakistan get engaged in increasing their military muscles to improve their relative security and maintain a balance of power.<sup>19</sup> Hence, strategic stability in the region has been fluctuating and witnessing deep delicacies. The fluctuations are due to some very eminent factors identified as major threats that include escalation dangers, arms advancement, stock piling, and crisis instabilities between the arch-rivals, India and Pakistan.<sup>20</sup> Along China, both South Asian rivals are equipping up with the latest offensive and defensive technologies.<sup>21</sup>

### 2.1. Quest for Arms Race among China, India and Pakistan:

Pakistan and India’s shared rivalry has frequently crashed to a point where a nuclear war, sometimes, appears to be a genuine chance. According to SIPRI Report, while India is one of the third biggest military spenders in the world after the US and China,<sup>22</sup> Pakistan is compelled to spend a certain portion of its gross domestic product (GDP) on building the military muscles to deter the Indian military’s favourable position. Historically, the civil Nuclear Deal between India and the US in 2005 was the prime breakthrough for India. The deal supported the provision of nuclear facilities to India that would be used for peaceful ventures and fulfilling India’s strategic nuclear interests by using its indigenously produced fissile material for weapons. In 2018, India’s successful launch of missiles like Agni IV and Agni V had adversely affected the security situation of the region. India is also focusing on the Ballistic Missile Defense known as the BMD system, which is under continuous development from the 1990s.<sup>23</sup> According to Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) Year Book 2020, “India and Pakistan are thought to be increasing

<sup>17</sup> Stephen P. Cohen, “Nuclear Weapons and Nuclear War in South Asia: An Unknowable Future”, Brookings, 2003, <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/cohens20020501.pdf>, p. 2

<sup>18</sup> Igor Davidzon, “Nuclear Weaponization and Warfighting Patterns—Theoretical Discussion”, In *Patterns of Conventional Warfighting under the Nuclear Umbrella*, Palgrave Pivot, Cham (2020): 11-32.

<sup>19</sup> Stuart Kaufman and Little et al., *The Balance of Power in World History* (2007).

<sup>20</sup> Hassan Jalil Shah and Naseem Anwar Khan, “Nuclear Deterrence and Conflict Transformation: assessing States Behaviour in South Asia”, *Margalla Papers* 2019, National Defence University, accessed December 23, 2020, [https://ndu.edu.pk/issra/issra\\_pub/articles/margalla-paper/margallapapers2019issueii/05-Nuclear-Deterrence.pdf](https://ndu.edu.pk/issra/issra_pub/articles/margalla-paper/margallapapers2019issueii/05-Nuclear-Deterrence.pdf),

<sup>21</sup> Mukhtar Ali Lati, and Usha Vaidiya, “The Unpredictable relations of India and Pakistan,” *International Journal of Political Science and Governance* (2020), accessed December 24, 2020, <http://www.journalofpoliticalscience.com/uploads/archives/2-1-22-186.pdf>,

<sup>22</sup> “Global military expenditure sees largest annual increase in a decade—says SIPRI—reaching \$1917 billion in 2019,” *Stockholm International Peace Research Institute*, April 27, 2020, <https://www.sipri.org/media/press-release/2020/global-military-expenditure-sees-largest-annual-increase-decade-says-sipri-reaching-1917-billion>, (accessed October 22, 2020).

<sup>23</sup> Muhammad Sajid, “Deterrence in South Asia: A Case Study of Prospects of War between Pakistan and India”, *Journal of Politics and International Studies* 6, No. 1 (2020), accessed December 24, 2020, [http://pu.edu.pk/images/journal/politicsAndInternational/PDF/12\\_v6\\_1\\_2020.pdf](http://pu.edu.pk/images/journal/politicsAndInternational/PDF/12_v6_1_2020.pdf),

the size of their nuclear arsenals.”<sup>24</sup>They are practically identical as both have the capacity to precisely attack each other’s domains to cause enormous destruction. India’s nuclear-controlled ballistic missile submarine like INS Arihant will give India a significant strike and area denial capability in the region. This capability gives India the status of a “nuclear ternion” – the capacity to dispatch nuclear strikes via land, air, and ocean. Pakistan, on the other hand, is dealing with sea-propelled missile systems to finish its own group of three.<sup>25</sup> Pakistan has longer-run nuclear weapons, for example, the Shaheen 3 missile that can hit Indian Andaman Islands close to Southeast Asia. Pakistan’s Ababeel missile and Babur-3 are also seen as deterrent. The nuclear-capable SLBM Babur-III is a great addition to neutralize India’s BMD system.

It is quite unfortunate that India, having a number of internal issues to focus and spend on, spends a significant part of its GDP on arm’s acquisition and procurement. SIPRI report states that India’s military spending grew by 6.8 percent to US\$71.1 billion in 2019. It is regarded as the highest military spending by any country in South Asia. Its recent acquisition of five of the 36 medium multi-role Rafale fighter jets built by French aircraft manufacturer Dassault, to upgrade its air force, has irked China and Pakistan. Pakistan terms the Indian Air Force’s (IAF) acquisition of Rafale jets as New Delhi’s disproportionate arms build-up<sup>26</sup> which could also lead to further arms race. With decades of Indo-China and Indo-Pakistan rivalry, scrapping of Article 370 in J&K, India’s aggressive force posturing and its refusal to participate in settlements, there is no decision left for Pakistan but to create significant and strategic military muscles with the help of China.<sup>27</sup> The most potent factor in this situation has been the possession of nuclear weapons and the intention of first use by Pakistan and India, others factors have been the intervention of the US and cost-benefit analysis did not give favourable equation to India in terms of limited war gaming. Both nuclear-outfitted adversaries, India and Pakistan not only neighbour nuclear China, but are also strategically placed in South Asia with advanced conventional and nuclear arms. The role of China in escalation control has not been significant owing to the kind of alliance it has with Pakistan.<sup>28</sup> China is a factor which has played pivotal role in the nuclearization of the region. Indian threat perception has been shaped by Chinese path of nuclearization. The most potent factor in this situation has been the possession of nuclear weapons and the intention of first use by Pakistan. The others factors have been the intervention of the US and cost-benefit analysis did not give favourable equation to India in terms of limited war gaming. The continuous hike in Indian defence budget since 2005 is making China and Pakistan’s security calculus vulnerable. India’s defence budget is largest than that of its South Asian neighbours, not to mention its size and population.

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<sup>24</sup> “World Nuclear Forces,” *SIPRI Year Book 2020*, <https://www.sipri.org/yearbook/2020/10>, (accessed December 26, 2020).

<sup>25</sup> Muhammad Jawad Hashmi and Sultan Mubariz Khan, "Emerging Network Centric Warfare Capabilities of Indian Military: Challenges for Pakistan’s Security", *Margalla Papers* 4 (2019), [https://ndu.edu.pk/issra/issra\\_pub/articles/margalla-paper/margallapapers2019issueii/04-Emerging-Network.pdf](https://ndu.edu.pk/issra/issra_pub/articles/margalla-paper/margallapapers2019issueii/04-Emerging-Network.pdf), (accessed December 26, 2020).

<sup>26</sup> Sajjad Baqir, “West abetting India arms build-up, Pakistan deplores,” *Dawn*, 31 Jul 2020.

<sup>27</sup> Irfan Ahmad Tahir, and Manzoor Khan Afridi, “Fifth Generations Warfare (5GW)-The New Dimensions of Enemies Launched Warfare and Security Concern of Pakistan,” *Global General Review* 4, No. 1 (2019), <https://www.grrjournal.com/jadmin/Auther/31rvlolA2LALJouq9hkR/deZ5alw1E.pdf>, (accessed December 27, 2020).

<sup>28</sup> Moeed Yousaf, “Banking on an outsider: implications for escalation control in South Asia”, *Arms Control Association*, [http://www.armscontrol.org/act/2011\\_06/Yusuf](http://www.armscontrol.org/act/2011_06/Yusuf), (accessed December 28, 2020).

While India cites China its primary security threat; almost 70 per cent of its defence forces are Pakistan-centric. Indian defence spending and the size of armed forces is three times the spending and size the Pakistan. Additionally, the technological improvements in armaments go about as a wellspring of strategic unrest for China India and Pakistan giving them a driving force to take action accordingly.

India tested nuclear weapons in 1974 declaring it peaceful nuclear explosion (PNE). It tested nuclear weapons again in 1998 citing China a threat to its security.

During last 6 decades, the China-Pak partnership fostered in all fields particularly civilian nuclear technology to the extent that Pakistan now hosts the central flank of Belt Road Initiative (BRI)<sup>29</sup> which is China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).<sup>30</sup> India embarking upon a robust arms race fundamentally perceives China to be a partner country to Pakistan. This China-Pakistan partnership has not shown any combined effect on the strategic stability equation of South Asia to the extent that China helps Pakistan in all most all fields of politics, military and economy. Moreover, it multiplies the security calculus of India by covert signaling aimed at Indian de-escalation.

In comparison to China, US has been playing assertive role in the region in times of crises while China only played behind the scene primarily considering its own strategic imperatives that have also equated with Pakistani imperatives, with CPEC the change in Chinese role is yet to be determined.<sup>31</sup> However, despite India's antagonism, Pakistan needs to make preparations for guaranteeing that its spending on the military buildup stays inside cutoff points.<sup>32</sup> With COVID-19 around, the globe is already witnessing new challenges. Pakistan and China may convince each other to not spend more on weapons but it is not possible to request US, France and Israel to stop their arms sales to India. India is strategically aligned with them as their geopolitical and commercial interests are at play. At international forums, Pakistan may highlight the fragility of situation in South Asia. It also needs to enhance its diplomatic engagement with the rest of the world to present its narrative.<sup>33</sup> While stopping an international arm race is not the key concern for major powers, Pakistan alone cannot convince any state to conclude arms control arrangements. Pakistan needs to prepare itself for any kind of crisis or war situation together with increasing its reach out to the international community through diplomacy tools and commercial interest tools.<sup>34</sup>

## 2.2. Indian Approach to Achieve Escalation-Domination:

Escalation Dominance approach is denoted as a condition where a state can escalate a contention in manners that will be disadvantageous or expensive to the rival while the enemy or adversary cannot do likewise consequently, either on the grounds that it has no escalation alternative or in

<sup>29</sup> "Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)", <https://www.beltroad-initiative.com/info/>, (accessed December 28, 2020).

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Yun Sun and Hannah Haegeland, "China and Crisis Management in South Asia", *Stimson Center*, 2018, <http://crises.stimson.org/china/>, (accessed December 28, 2020).

<sup>32</sup> Igor Davidzon, "Nuclear Weaponization and Warfighting Patterns—Theoretical Discussion."

<sup>33</sup> Malik Qasim Mustafa Khokhar, *Director Arms Control and Disarmament Centre (ACDC)* (December 29, 2020), Personal Interview.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.



light of the fact that the accessible choices would not improve the rival's circumstance.<sup>35</sup> From a lens of escalation dominance, an analysis of the history of contentions and crisis in South Asia since 1990 shows that the danger of any contention turning out to be nuclear has had a hosing impact on Indian policymaking and strategy, despite the fact that nuclear deterrence has forestalled major front wars.<sup>36</sup> The chance of escalation drove India to restrict the geographic extent of its airstrikes during the 1999 Kargil Crisis. It was likewise a significant component of Indian strategic thinking that drove India to deploy military yet not cross the outskirts of India during the 2001–2002 emergency and to restrict reactions to financial and strategic methods following the assaults in Mumbai in 2008. None of the military choices available to India in these encounters could have been utilized in manners that would obviously dodge further escalation. In its endeavour to achieve escalation dominance against Pakistan, India is depending on its strategic relations with the US, which is already stressed over the ascent of China. After 9/11, strategic relations between India and US took a new turn when “various sanctions forced prior were eliminated; the tech revolution was welcomed; political help was conceded to India's own war on terror; the J&K dispute was reevaluated with a tilt towards India.” In 2005, a 10-year Defense Pact was marked trailed by an Indo-US nuclear arrangement, portrayed by Aston Carter as straightforwardly recognizing India as an “authentic nuclear force.” Since then, India and the US have expanded and developed the extent of their defense engagement. At present, India is among the best ten military spending nations on the planet.<sup>37</sup> India's key modernization drive and its gigantic arms-development is broadening the hole in regular military capacities among India and Pakistan and compelling Islamabad to depend increasingly more on its nuclear alternative to balance India's customary power advantage.<sup>38</sup> After Kargil Crisis in 1999, the year 2019 brought another important developments which further represented Indian desire for escalation domination. It came in February 2019 when Indian warplanes crossed the Line of Control (LoC) and launched airstrikes near Balakot, Pakistan. By compromising the utilization of nuclear weapons because of compelling Indian military activities, and by tolerating a more serious danger of escalation, Pakistan clearly kept India from following up the escalation ladder in South Asia.<sup>39</sup> However, future crises can escalate sharply and rapidly that will be less open to crisis management.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>35</sup>Evan Braden Montgomery, and Eric S. Edelman, "Rethinking Stability in South Asia: India, Pakistan, and the Competition for Escalation Dominance", *Journal of Strategic Studies* 38, No. 1-2 (2015): 159-182.

<sup>36</sup>Al Mauroni, "Nuclear Strategy in the Modern Era: Regional Powers and International Conflict," *Strategic Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (2016): 147.

<sup>37</sup>Devin T. Hagerty, "Deterrence Stability in South Asia Today", *Nuclear Weapons and Deterrence Stability in South Asia*, Palgrave Pivot, Cham (2020): 67-107.

<sup>38</sup>Ahmed W. Waheed, "The 'Truth' About Pakistan: Knowledge Production and Circulation in International Relations," In *Constructing Pakistan through Knowledge Production in International Relations and Area Studies* (Palgrave Macmillan, Singapore, 2020), 39-80.

<sup>39</sup>Zachary Davis ed., *The India-Pakistan Military Standoff: Crisis and Escalation in South Asia* (Palgrave Macmillan: US, 2011).

<sup>40</sup> "From Kargil to Balakot: Southern Asian Crisis Dynamics and Future Trajectories", *A Project by Stimson Centre*, 2020, <https://www.stimson.org/2020/from-kargil-to-balakot-southern-asian-crisis-dynamics-and-future-trajectories/>, (accessed December 28, 2020).

Similarly, Joint Doctrine of Indian Armed Forces (JDIAF)<sup>41</sup> “will have longterm implications for Pakistan’s threat perceptions and force posturing. The doctrine categorically states that Indian forces will deal with cross border threats with surgical strikes. India claimed cross-LoC ‘surgical strikes’ of September 29, 2016 flagging another type of sub-conventional reaction.”<sup>42</sup> In addition to JDIAF, “Land Warfare Doctrine (LWD) promulgated in later half of December 2018 and New India Doctrine 2020, offers an insight of Indian strategic thinking and dominant logic that drives Indian posturing and behaviour towards Pakistan.”<sup>43</sup>

“While going through these characteristics of JDIAF, it can justifiably be argued that Indian strategic culture and thinking patterns have been gradually overwhelmed with ideas that induce strategic imbalance in the region between Pakistan and India. Indian ambitions to outnumber Pakistan in limited conventional warfare by means of technological advancements, adopting disruptive technologies and integrating operational facets of three armed forces, have drastically threatened the peace of the region. A certain reflection of this can be noted in policy line Indian forces are sticking to, since last few years, particularly under the Prime Minister Narendra Modi government. The latest of these doctrinal additions was LWD.”<sup>44</sup>

### 2.3. J&K and Ladakh Disputes - The Bones of Contention:

In contemporary international politics, the Himalayan region of J&K marks itself as a hotspot of one of the modern history’s longest-running disputes. J&K holds geostrategic and geopolitical importance between China, India and Pakistan.<sup>45</sup> The dispute is a legacy left by Britain at the time of partition of subcontinent in 1947. The dispute has brutally taken away a more significant number of lives and have been proceeding with a greater number than those of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

With a populace of over 80 per cent Muslims, J&K was a Muslim populated region at the time of partition. The code of partition was set that every individual state, in view of a huge number of components, populace rate taking the crown, would join Hindu India or Muslim Pakistan.<sup>46</sup> With J&K’s constrained push to the recently framed Republic of India as opposed to the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, it was the start of abuse and strife that seriously destabilized the region. The domain of J&K went to India in light of the fact that the Maharaja of the state, Hari Singh, belonged to Hindu origins.<sup>47</sup> With insubordination from the J&K public and distress during the hour of the segment, he called the Indian administration for help and marked ‘The Instrument of Accession of

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<sup>41</sup> “Joint Doctrine of Indian Armed Forces”, *Bharat Shakti*, April 2017, [https://bharatshakti.in/wpcontent/uploads/2015/09/Joint\\_Doctrine\\_Indian\\_Armed\\_Forces.pdf](https://bharatshakti.in/wpcontent/uploads/2015/09/Joint_Doctrine_Indian_Armed_Forces.pdf), (accessed on December 29, 2020).

<sup>42</sup> Gulshan Bibi, “Deterrence Adrift: Dissecting Indian Coercive Military Doctrines 2017-18, *Journal of Security and Strategic Analysis*, 6, No.1 (2020): 26.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Muhammad Sajid, “Deterrence in South Asia: A case study of prospects of war between Pakistan & India.”

<sup>46</sup> Victoria Schofield, *Kashmir in Conflict: India, Pakistan and the Unending War* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2010).

<sup>47</sup> Dmitri Trenin, "Stability amid Strategic Deregulation: Managing the End of Nuclear Arms Control," *The Washington Quarterly* 43, no. 3 (2020): 161-175.

J&K to India.’ This made Indian soldiers legitimately come into the state and attempt to flush out the political dissidents looking to join Pakistan. From more than 70 years of water theft and oppression of J&Kis, India’s forced annexation and change in the status of IndianJ&Khas redefined the geostrategic importance of J&K in the stability of the region. The unresolved J&KDisputeis and always will be a hotspot of destabilization in the South Asian region.<sup>48</sup>

Currently, the relationship between China and Pakistan and India and Pakistan is at the rock bottom. Indian action of scrappingArticle 370 to change status of J&K has challenged sovereignty of Pakistan and China. The Indian move divided J&K in into two federal territories; J&K and Ladakh - in an attempt to integrate disputed territory between China and India fully into Indian federation. China got seriously concerned about the current situation in J&K and is opposed to the move to make Ladakh a Union Territory. The decision stoked anger and resentment not only in China and J&K but also in Pakistan. Pakistan never subscribed to Article 370 or 35-A because it always considered that these articles are mere delaying tactics on the part of India. Whatever legislative measures India has taken, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC)Resolution 1951, which clearly stipulates that Article 370 was a legislative measure and so was 35-A. Though it gave certain privileges to people of J&K, however, J&Kis themselves have rejected the decision by the Indian government. Until now, theelections held in J&K by Indian administration were also fraudulent. It has been admitted by Indian spy agency, Research and Analysis Wing (RAW) Chief A. S. Daulat that the elections held inJ&K were fraudulent because the Indian government feared that if the representatives of the J&Kis get elected, situation would be different and they could revolt. The continuous skirmishes along Line of Actual Control (LAC) between China and India, LoC between India and Pakistan and Pathankot incident in 2019 have deteriorated the dialogue process among China, India and Pakistan. J&K is a nuclear flashpoint and can lead to a total war between India and Pakistan. Pakistan’s Prime Minister,Mr. Imran Khan, in his address at UNGA in September 2019 has clearly spoken about a potential nuclear war between India and Pakistan over J&K. During the same session, the Indian Prime Minister, Mr. Narendra Modi avoided any mention of J&K in his speech. This attitude by Indian government shows the lack of seriousness and callous approach of India towards J&KDispute. It also gives space to other forces as well, who do not want Indo-Pak relations normalized.<sup>49</sup> Mr. Qasim Mustafa, Director Arms Control and Disarmament Centre at the Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad also believes that India is not interested to come to the negotiation table and there is no pressure (internal or external) on India to move forward for a dialogue. However, the role of influential third party cannot be ruled out to break the ice.<sup>50</sup>

#### **2.4.Nuclear South Asia and Crisis Management:**

In contrast to conventional weapons, nuclear weapons make an enduring and sweeping impact that could overturn life on Earth if warring adversaries were to utilize them in adequate numbers.<sup>51</sup> However, during decaying relations between China and India and India and Pakistan, nuclear

<sup>48</sup>Victoria Schofield, *Kashmir in conflict*.

<sup>49</sup> Ambassador (R) Asif Durrani, Senior Research Fellow, *Islamabad Policy Research Institute* (September 29, 2020), Personal Interview.

<sup>50</sup> Malik Qasim Mustafa Khokhar, *Director Arms Control and Disarmament Centre (ACDC)* (December 29, 2020), Personal Interview.

<sup>51</sup>SumitGanguly, "Nuclear Stability in South Asia," *International Security* 33, No. 2 (2008): 45-70.

weapons have played a successful role by deterring and shielded the contentions from blowing into major wars. J&K dispute, as discussed above, can potentially take two nuclear-outfitted nations to a conflict<sup>52</sup> that may lead to a nuclear war.<sup>53</sup> In South Asia, the growing arms race proves that India seeks to overwhelm China and Pakistan. While Pakistan's nuclear policy is to hold an undeclared nuclear doctrine that provides the right to attain first-use policy to deter any sort of threat but that does not plug the gap.<sup>54</sup> The conflicts under the nuclear umbrella are quite evident from Galawan Skirmishes, Balakot strikes and Pulwama Crisis in 2019. The ongoing debates suggest that there is a critical need to take momentary measures to lessen nuclear dangers. The dialogue on mutual threat perceptions and military doctrines on all sides should be taken seriously. It will build a sustainable environment to overcome the long-term conflicts between three neighbours which face common challenges such as COVID-19, climate change and food insecurity.<sup>55</sup>

### 3. Way Forward:

The strategic instability has been increasing due to the absence and unavailability of effective measures and integrative processes. Nuclear deterrence has undoubtedly succeeded in averting large scale wars but still, it does not promise long-lasting peace. It avoids conventional threats but non-conventional threats still exist. The increased engagement of external actors in the politics of the South Asian region and specifically in Indo-Pak relations might push towards strategic stability as it can be seen in increased Chinese engagement with Pakistan in form of CPEC, on one hand and on the contrary, augmented US engagement with India in order to enable India to stand up to China.<sup>56</sup> In South Asia, international community is just trying to prevent a crisis; it is not preventing an arms race. The US is propping up India to stand up to China. It believes that the more it bolsters India, the more India would stand up to China. To recreate the balance in the region, Pakistan allies itself more with China. Hence, the following policy recommendation can be realized in order to tackle emerging threats to the strategic stability in the region:

- a. The 21st century is the Asian Century. The Greater South Asia has emerged as a geo-economic concept, driven by economy and energy, roads and railways, and ports and pipelines. CPEC project is not against any country. Its purpose is to serve as a key to enhancing peace and cooperation in the region. It will also prove to be a major breakthrough in trade and communication between the three regional nuclear countries.
- b. The bilateral relations between India and Pakistan are downgraded from Ambassadorial level. To upgrade the relationship, one should break the ice and talk. However, there is agitation in normalizing Indo-Pak relations in India. For this reason, India needs to be

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<sup>52</sup> Foster Klug, "Pakistan PM Warns of War with India over Disputed Kashmir," *AP NEWS* (Associated Press, September 24, 2019), <https://apnews.com/f6c5960c3a9a48c2a98508081271c55e>, (accessed on December 30, 2020).

<sup>53</sup> Devin T. Hagerty et al., *The consequences of nuclear proliferation: Lessons from South Asia* (MIT Press, 1998).

<sup>54</sup> Zafar Nawaz Jaspal, "Tactical Nuclear Weapon: Deterrence Stability between India and Pakistan", *Center on Contemporary Conflict (CCC), Monterey, United States*, 2012.

<sup>55</sup> Jens Heinrich, "Arms Control without Treaties? Opportunities for Gradual Arms Control in Indo-Pakistani Relations", *Zeitschrift für Friedens- und Konfliktforschung*: 1-32.

<sup>56</sup> Muntazir Ali, "China as a Factor of Stability in South Asia: Problems and Prospects", *Pakistan Horizon* 63, No. 3 (2010): 63-75.

pressurized to resume bilateral dialogues; the domestic pressure from J&K itself and international pressure by UN and international community.<sup>57</sup>

- c. Currently, the Indian population is united over the J&K question. Prime Minister Modi's actions have also generated a wave in India which is against minorities. With the scrapping of Article 370, all Confidence Building Measures (CBMs) gains have stopped. The nature of CBMs in past was also temporary with temporary gains only; they have been unable to resolve the core issues and there have been serious doubts about the utility of CBMs in Indo-Pak context. The process in past was not followed by the two sides in letter and spirit. They have also been generally viewed with skepticism and as an alien concept by many in South Asia.<sup>58</sup> So, the best way to CBMs between both countries is to go back to Lahore Memorandum of Understanding and revise Lahore Agreement. The Lahore Agreement has the structural framework based on which any future agreement can successfully be made relevant as well as operational.
- d. The idea of Strategic Restraint Regime (SRR), that was coined 20 years back, is outdated at this moment as a lot of things have changed; such as technological evolutions, modernized weapon systems, new forms of sub-conventional warfare, latest information and cyber tools. There can be a proposal for a new SRR but it has to be a much broader Restraint Regime because India and Pakistan are now much advanced nuclear powers. The new SRR has to be a larger Asian system.
- e. South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) is hostage to India-Pakistan tensions. It was quite obvious when in 2016 the SAARC summit was supposed to be held in Pakistan but India on the pretext of terrorism declined to attend the summit. India tried to isolate Pakistan diplomatically and also lured Afghanistan and Bangladesh into it. Additionally, according to the Charter of SAARC, the decision in SAARC are taken on the basis on consensus only and it does not allow discussions on territorial disputes. Till the time, India agrees on participating in a SAARC Summit, the Summit is not going to be held. So for regional growth and prosperity, it is important that India comes on board.
- f. Pakistan needs to ensure its conventional deterrence capabilities against India, keeping in view the recent Indian rapid modernization in terms of conventional arms. Pakistan can also expand the joint-ness of war-commencement by actively engaging the Chairman Joint Chiefs of Staff Committee (CJCSC). This advisory group can build up a joint power precept to be tried and utilized through processes and activities. Expanded coordination would help in better insight sharing and multi-space readiness, motioning enemy's moves and Pakistan's aim and ability to fight back. It will also support Pakistani intelligence agencies to work more effectively.
- g. The 2019 Indo-Pak confrontation in Pulwama-Balakot episode witnessed an aerial engagement between India and Pakistan which made it clear that aerial capabilities are the need of the hour to ensure strategic stability. Pakistan has to focus on enhancing combat capabilities to deter as well as retaliate towards Indian aerial capabilities. The possible way to enhance aerial capabilities would be cooperating with China and obtain defense system. Likewise, Pakistan should consider improving radar systems and technologies. Pakistan's military engagement with Beijing should open new opportunities and ventures for Pakistani

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<sup>57</sup> Ambassador (R) Asif Durrani, Senior Research Fellow, Islamabad Policy Research Institute, (December 29, 2020), Personal Interview.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

forces to grow. Bolstering China's rising stakes in the region, Pakistan should benefit from it by up-grading its military technologies and strengthening military muscles.

- h. Building trust among China, India and Pakistan should help fortify peace in the region. As long as BJP government is in power, Pakistan cannot successfully initiate a dialogue process with India. Pakistan, officially, cannot give up on J&K, China will not give Ladakh to India and India will not take its decision of scrapping Article 370 back. The shared nuclear discouragement between China and India, and India and Pakistan should be strengthened by improving crisis correspondence channels, exchanging data about the advancement of the nations' nuclear abilities, and participating in exchange on military, security, and policy centered issues. The political and military initiative of the three nations—particularly Pakistan's military, with its profound effect on safeguard and security policymaking—ought to be completely liable for executing these means.

### **Conclusion:**

Geography plays an important role in South Asia as China, India and Pakistan are connected. Every strategic development in any of the three countries casts direct bearings on other countries particularly anything happening between India and China. Nuclear weapons are confounding bits of innovation as their proficiency of destruction is best settled when they are not placed for wars. This quandary is further insane when one state is an adversary with the other. Escalation practices are both inescapable and maybe one of the most destroying slips up in nuclear deterrence that requires a noteworthy degree of trust. To accomplish such an obstruction, rivalries and conflicts should be resolved; an alert should be reinstated and communication should be continuous between China, India and Pakistan. It is important to note that Pakistan does not perceive threat if China advances its capabilities because of its bilateral relations of trust and economic partnership. The US stance in this field is one of the external variables that affect the trio of India, Pakistan and China. The emerging US strategic alliance, partly driven by America's aim to limit China, is gradually, but indisputably changing South Asia's strategic position, especially the Philippines, and power balance. As China's desire to balance and restrict India with Pakistan is becoming stronger and stronger, as are Pakistan's incentives to rely on China for the same equilibrium effect on India. India's policy of conditional first use of nuclear weapons combined with Pakistan's ambiguous nuclear doctrine and tactical weapons, insurgency in J&K, Sino-Indian border skirmishes and Indian opposition of CPEC increase the potential for misperception and/or nuclear escalation in the region and leads to concerns about the stability. China, through economic initiatives, can play a role of stabilizer to solidify strategic stability and lessen tensions with India and the US.

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