South Asia’s foremost security concern is the nuclear competition between India and Pakistan. The South Asian nuclear predicament hangs over approximately two billion lives in the region. India and Pakistan’s longstanding mutual distrust has resulted in a political and security stalemate, with one perceiving the other as a perennial threat in the struggle for regional prominence and status as a nuclear weapon state. The wars in 1947, 1965, 1971, and 1999, as well as arms procurement supported by US and China, attest to this.

**Balance of terror**

India has an estimated stockpile of 100 to 120 nuclear weapons. Its nuclear forces are a mix of land-, sea- and air-based capabilities, including short-, medium- and intermediate-range ballistic missiles, submarine-launched ballistic missiles, submarine-launched systems, and strategic bombers, among others. An inventory of its stockpile reveals 3.2 tonnes of highly-enriched uranium (HEU), 5.5 tonnes of reactor-grade plutonium, and 0.6 tonnes of weapons-grade plutonium. In addition, India is planning to build six fast-breeder reactors that will significantly increase its capacity to produce plutonium for weapons. It is projected to spend USD 80 billion for its military build-up in 2020.

Meanwhile, Pakistan purportedly has the world’s fastest-growing nuclear weapons program. It currently possesses 130 to 140 nuclear warheads, an approximate stockpile of 1.2 tonnes of HEU, and up to 24 kilograms of plutonium. Pakistan has the highest rate of production of nuclear warheads and is increasing its uranium and plutonium stockpile. Advancing its capabilities at such a substantial rate, Pakistan is projected to exceed the nuclear arsenals of India, China, France, and UK in the next 10 years. Just recently, it successfully test fired its first ever nuclear-capable, submarine-launched cruise missile Babur-III, which has a range of 450 kilometers, features terrain-hugging and sea-skimming flight capabilities that enable it to evade hostile radars and air defenses, as well as other stealth technologies.

Advances in both India and Pakistan’s nuclear arsenals and delivery systems have upped the ante in terms of possible destruction in the event of a nuclear confrontation. Thus, each state does not want to extend violence beyond skirmishes for fear of possible escalation from conventional to nuclear war, which may ultimately lead to mutually assured destruction (MAD).

**Fragility of nuclear deterrence**

Since 2003, India has committed to a No First Use (NFU) policy, grounded on the doctrine of minimal nuclear deterrence. India’s nuclear weapons program is considered defensive in nature, aimed at safeguarding the country’s national interest against perceived threats posed by similarly nuclear-armed Pakistan and China.

Nonetheless, the fragility of nuclear deterrence came to the fore at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology’s 2017 Nuclear Policy Conference. Mr. Vipin Narang, a South Asian nuclear strategy expert, argued that there are many possible scenarios that can undermine India’s policy. For instance, India may resort to a preemptive strike if it believes
Pakistan will use its tactical nuclear weapons against it. With the expansion of India’s nuclear arsenal, particularly the development of new submarine nuclear forces, there are discussions whether India may shift to a “preemptive nuclear counterforce” posture.

In comparison, Pakistan does not have a clear, articulated national nuclear doctrine. However, Pakistani national security authorities emphasize that it upholds the pillars of restraint and responsibility of its nuclear program, which is spurred by, among other aims, “deterring external aggression, counterforce strategies by securing strategic assets and threatening nuclear retaliation, and stabilizing strategic deterrence in South Asia.” Nuclear weapons would only be the last resort in conflicts.

The risk that the existing nuclear competition between India and Pakistan might escalate parallels the increasing US-China strategic rivalry. While initially reluctant, the US eventually expressed its guarded support for India’s nuclear ambitions and its weapons program, as illustrated by the landmark Indo-US Civil Nuclear Deal in 2008. US nuclear policy towards India has moved from non-proliferation to post-proliferation. The US also perceives India as a hedge against China’s rise in the region. China, meanwhile, supports Pakistan by providing nuclear and fissile materials for its nuclear weapons program. With these developments, the trajectory of nuclear security in the region seems bleak as the proliferation and expansion of nuclear weapons of India and Pakistan show no signs of dissipation.

**Securing the bomb**

There is also the looming concern of nuclear weapons and its components falling into the hands of terrorists. The presence of “extremist Islamic groups within Pakistan and the surrounding region, a history of political instability, uncertain loyalties of senior officials in the civilian and military chain of command, and a nascent nuclear command and control system” continues to be an increasingly worrying prospect. There have also been reported incidents of small-scale attacks outside the Minhas (Kamra) Air Force Base housing the Pakistan Aeronautical Complex, which serves as a storage facility for nuclear weapons.

Both India and Pakistan have developed their nuclear arsenals outside the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT). There are continued doubts on the security of their nuclear facilities and arsenals, as both states do not subject themselves to safeguards administered by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). The acquisition of nuclear or radiological weapons by terror units will have crippling and devastating consequences for the state of security not only in the region, but the rest of the world.

**Considerations and implications of a nuclear conflict**

The specifications of India and Pakistan’s nuclear arsenal are not disclosed to the public. But judging from their respective nuclear tests in 1998, Pokhran II – the first nuclear fusion bomb detonated by India – produced a 43-kiloton yield. Chagai II – Pakistan’s second fission weapon – produced a 12-kiloton yield. Such numbers are comparable to the Little Boy and Fat Man used in Nagasaki and Hiroshima which produced a yield of 12-23 kilotons. One could imagine the level of destruction if these numbers multiplied into 230, which is the approximate total of both countries’ arsenals.

The fear of nuclear confrontation between India and Pakistan is not without justification. South Asia features among the likeliest global nuclear flashpoints... If India and Pakistan fights a nuclear war using even a fraction of their arsenals, approximately 2 billion people will die from direct casualties, if not from heat, radiation, or famine.”

The study conducted by Dr. Ira Helfand revealed that a limited regional war in South Asia would cause significant climate disruptions worldwide and result in a decline in agricultural output, increase in food prices, and failure of the exports market. More than 2 billion people will face nuclear-induced famine.
There are approximately 8,500 Filipinos in South Asia. Of this number, 1,214 are in India and 1,501 are in Pakistan whose safety and interests must be protected. Despite the geographical distance, Asia and other parts of the globe must also be rightly concerned about the security unrest in South Asia, particularly in a growing economy like India. The instability caused by these unrests have negative ripple effects, such as disturbance in trade and economic relations, as well as creating an environment of unease and unpredictability in the region.

The nuclear conundrum in the region will likely persist, but it is also an opportunity for the international community to show its determination to prevent the further escalation of tensions and the outbreak of a full-on nuclear conflict.

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