

## The China–India–Pakistan Nuclear Triangle: Consequential Choices for Asian Security

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### **Abstract**

Asia-Pacific is the new locus of global power politics. To contain the rise of China, India has joined the United States in shaping a ‘geo-political’ response to China’s ‘geo-economic’ outreach. A ‘maritime dimension’ has been added to the complex ‘continental’ contestations between India–China and India–Pakistan, injecting new risks of nuclear instability in the region.

China’s overarching strategic priority is development. It eschews bloc politics and military entanglements and seeks accommodation with the United States. Responsibly managing competition is emerging as a key theme. Mutual interdependence may eventually yield a stable equilibrium between the United States and China.

India’s nuclear and military modernisation programs are status driven. It is now the recipient of high technology weapon systems from the United States and is developing a robust sea-based capacity to dominate the Indian Ocean. The Indo–US defence partnership has led to a worsening of India–China relations and disturbs the tenuous strategic balance between Pakistan and India.

A nuclear conflict between China and India is unlikely. Both profess nuclear doctrines of no-first-use. Given the political will, their border dispute is amenable to a peaceful resolution. Nuclear risks in South Asia remain high. India's obsession with Pakistan has deep domestic political undertones and is used by the BJP to win elections. Conventional imbalance and Indian bellicosity have compelled Pakistan to develop a doctrine of 'full-spectrum' credible minimum nuclear deterrence. Pakistan seeks a peaceful settlement of the Jammu and Kashmir dispute.

Pakistan's new 'geo-economics' paradigm includes South Asia–Central Asia cooperation, which could bring benefits of inter-regional cooperation to India.

## **Keywords**

nuclear triangle; Asian security; maritime contestations

## **Introduction**

Asia is now the fulcrum of global power politics. This complicates the quest for building regional stability, harmony and prosperity. This paper examines the wider regional and global geopolitical entanglements of China, India and Pakistan and prospects of promoting regional stability and avoidance of nuclear conflict. To the conflictual 'continental' dynamics of China, India and Pakistan, the US Indo–Pacific strategy has inserted a 'maritime' dimension with 'land and sea' and 'geo-politic and geo-economic' connotations.

India is a lynchpin of the US Indo–Pacific strategy and the locus of the China, India and Pakistan nuclear triangle. The choices that India makes will determine the trajectory of India–China and India–Pakistan relations. India aspires to a global power status that requires it to outmatch China and dominate South Asia and the Indian Ocean region. Pakistan is concerned over Indian conventional preponderance that poses a threat to its security.

## **Global Disarray: An Age of Disruptions**

The global order is being unravelled at an unprecedented pace. Change is the buzzword. The unipolar moment has passed. Global power is more diffused. Existing political, economic and governance systems are undergoing change and adjustment to the new environment, yet there is no global consensus on managing change.

The primary drivers of change are technology, demography and globalisation. Individuals, families, societies and communities are being impacted. There is both despair and hope, a craving to revert to the certitude of the past or to boldly venture ahead on an uncertain path to create a better tomorrow. Popular discontent, inequities and inequalities, xenophobia, tribalism, radicalism, identity politics, racial discrimination and intolerance are signs and symptoms of societies unhinged.

## **A question of primacy**

The United States considers China as its number one challenge. If not contained, China will overtake the United States as the number one economic and technological power with attendant geo-political consequences. There is bipartisan consensus in the United States on the China threat. The Biden Administration seeks to build an alliance of maritime democracies against China; reinvigorate its defence alliances in the region and extend NATO's role to China (Indo-Pacific). A multifaceted strategy deploying diplomatic, economic and technological tools is in the works.

President Biden has sought Europe's support in forging a united front against China. There are references to China in the NATO, G-7 and US–EU summit communiques of June 2021. The EU-US Summit statement mentions adopting “similar multi-faceted approaches to China, which include elements of cooperation, competition, and systemic rivalry.”

## **Quad**

The first in-person summit meeting of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) countries was held on 26 September 2021 in Washington DC. Without mentioning China, leaders of four large democracies—the United States, India, Japan and Australia—reiterated their commitment to a free and open Indo-Pacific region that is “undaunted by coercion.” The Quad is an anti-China alliance. Quad members have taken part in joint naval exercises and stepped-up defence partnerships with one another. China thinks the Quad alliance is “doomed to fail” (Choudhury 2021).

## **AUKUS (Australia, United Kingdom, United States Military Alliance)**

The Australia, UK and US (AUKUS) trilateral alliance for cooperation in new and emerging technologies for defence, including provision of sensitive technologies and equipment to Australia for building nuclear powered submarines, was announced on 15 September 2021. In the shadow of the Quad, AUKUS constitutes a tangible step at extending the military dominance of major western powers in the Asia–Pacific with an unstated but implicit objective of containing China.

In providing Australia with nuclear power propulsion technology for military purposes, a notable exception has been made. There is ambiguity and difference in opinion whether this provision of nuclear submarines to Australia violates the NPT in spirit, if not in letter. But it does introduce new uncertainties concerning non-proliferation norms. This step could fuel an arms race. It is not yet clear whether India will also be given similar support, though the AUKUS deal might validate India's lease of a nuclear-powered submarine from Russia.

## **Regional implications of great power competition**

Imposition of great power competition tends to polarise the broader Asian region and diminishes the role of regional states and institutions in navigating political and security issues. For the regional states, it is impossible to choose between China and the United States.

ASEAN's carefully crafted role in navigating the region to greater stability and prosperity through the thickets of intra-regional issues and global politics could be adversely affected. The question is: will ASEAN centrality suffer or will it impose greater responsibility on them to save the region from a disastrous conflict?

Pakistan finds itself faced with these dilemmas. The South Asian security dynamics is being affected by the Indo-US defence partnership. Pakistan wishes to have good relations with both China and the United States. Pakistan desires to see the United States playing a positive role for peace and strategic stability in South Asia, which is being materially altered by infusion of new technologies and weapon systems to India by the West.

### China's Strategic Priority

China has pursued development as its number one strategic priority. This will not change in the near future. According to President Xi Jinping, "achieving the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation has been the greatest dream of the Chinese people...the goal of building China into a modern socialist country that is prosperous, strong, democratic, culturally advanced and harmonious can be achieved by 2049." This is a clear iteration of China's strategic direction.

China's GDP in 2021 was \$17.7 trillion in nominal terms (according to the China's National Bureau of Statistics).<sup>1</sup> And the PPP GDP/per capita is expected to reach \$17,700.<sup>2</sup> Despite considerable progress since 1978, when it began to open up and reform its economy, China still has a long way to go to reach its stated goals.

A well-synchronised internal and external policy that is superbly executed and an aversion to embarking on military ventures has been key to China's marvellous economic and technological achievements. China does not believe in bloc politics and has eschewed building military alliances. Its focus is on forging a win-win economic partnership, as envisaged in the Belt and Road Initiative and has advocated the concept of forging a community of 'shared future'. In this context, NATO is viewed as an anachronism in this age of increasing global interdependence.

China has benefited from the existing international order, signified by the UN Charter and upheld international principles, norms and values. Its position on global issues is based on principles. It has opposed double standards and selective application of norms and rules. It has adopted a constructive and principled approach to issues related to the reform of the UN system including expansion of the Security Council and opposed adding new permanent members. China has advocated a criterion-based equitable approach for including new members in the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG).

China attaches considerable importance to ASEAN, is a Full Dialogue Partner and member of the ASEAN Plus Three. It is also a member of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and joined

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<sup>1</sup> Decoding China's 2021 GDP Growth Rate. [www.china-briefing.com](http://www.china-briefing.com)

<sup>2</sup> Trading Economics China's GDP per capita PPP-2021 Data. [www.tradingeconomics.com](http://www.tradingeconomics.com)

the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) that constitutes the largest free trade agreement.

### **China's nuclear modernisation efforts**

China has historically maintained a nuclear strategy of “minimum deterrence.” According to SIPRI, China maintains an estimated total stockpile of about 260 nuclear warheads, a number which has remained relatively stable but is slowly increasing. China has also maintained a no-first-use policy since its first nuclear test in 1964. Unlike Russia and the United States, China has found nuclear weapons to be of rather limited utility in war-fighting. It built what it describes as a “lean and effective” nuclear deterrent, with the intentions of deterring a nuclear attack and preventing nuclear coercion.

China tested a nuclear-capable hypersonic missile in August 2021, demonstrating an advanced space capability that caught US intelligence by surprise. The Chinese Foreign Ministry denied the report and spokesperson Zhao Lijian said that the test was of “spacecraft, not missile.”

According to the United States, China is resisting talks with the United States on nuclear weapons (Reuters 2021). China has also not responded to NATO's interest in arms control dialogue. China is not in the US–Russia category of nuclear armaments, neither does it fit the historical pattern of East–West arms negotiations. China also has not demonstrated interest in officially discussing nuclear-related issues with India. The Indian nuclear program is not directly relevant to China's national defence priorities. A nuclear conflict between India and China seems unlikely.

### **The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)**

The Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is a transparent economic reach-out to the world to establish wholly voluntary and inclusive economic and trade partnerships. Chinese capital and technology and its massive manufacturing capabilities are being offered to developing countries to build infrastructure, energy and port projects. The China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is an integral part of the BRI. India has opposed the BRI and CPEC. The BRI is also the operative arm of inter-regional cooperation in Eurasia. China, along with Russia, plays a leading role in the Shanghai Cooperation organisation (SCO) that also includes Central Asian states, Pakistan, India and Iran. Afghanistan is likely to join the organisation.

### **China and South Asia**

China has significant development partnerships with Pakistan, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and even Maldives: Pakistan (China-Pakistan Economic Corridor), Myanmar (oil and natural gas twin pipelines, power plants), Nepal (hydro projects, rail connectivity, cement and infrastructure), Bangladesh (infrastructure projects), Maldives and Sri Lanka (ports, roads, maritime projects). China is also engaging with Bhutan. On 14 October 2021, China and Bhutan signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on a Three-Step Roadmap to help speed up boundary talks (Global Times 2021).

## China and India

Chinese investments in South Asia are viewed in Delhi as 'encirclement' of India and as transgressing its self-appropriated strategic space. On the other hand, India's deepening military partnership with the United States, its membership of the Quad, co-sponsoring of the Malabar exercises and joining patrols in the South China sea are viewed by China as inimical to its core interests.

Geo-politics aside, China and India have a robust economic and trade partnership. "India's trade with China is set to cross the \$100 billion mark for the first time in 2021...two-way trade jumped 49% in the first nine months to \$90.37 billion. India's imports from China surged 51.7% to \$68.4 billion, while India's exports rose 42.5% to \$21.9 billion" (Krishnan 2021). A report titled "Chinese Investments in India" by Gateway House "estimates that the total value of Chinese investments in Indian start-ups between 2015 to 2020 is approximately US \$4 billion. In fact, as of March 2020, 18 out of 30 Indian unicorns are heavily backed by Chinese investments" (Bhowmick 2021).

China had primarily viewed India from its commercial interests and demonstrated strategic patience in developing good neighbourly relations with India. China had maintained that the region was big enough to accommodate the aspirations of both India and China. The Xi-Modi informal summits in Wuhan (2018) and Chennai (2019) had raised expectations about high level efforts towards reaching some rapprochement. However, India's decision to forge a defence partnership with the United States to contain China obliged Beijing to review its position and regard India as being actively hostile.

In the Spring of 2020, China reacted to India's aggressive infrastructure development in eastern Ladakh along the disputed border leading to skirmishes on the Line of Actual Control (LAC). The Chinese actions were also in response to renewal of Indian claim to Chinese territory of Aksai Chin and the 5 August 2019 illegal Indian actions in dissolving the state of Jammu and Kashmir and incorporation of Ladakh in the Indian Union Territory.

The Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson rejected and declared the Indian actions as illegal.

India-China relations are on a downward trajectory. The economic, technological and military gaps between the two are enormous. Moreover, the US Indo-Pacific is essentially a maritime notion that may not be of any use in terms of contests on land. Indian strategists worry about a two or two and half front threat posed by China, Pakistan and from within- notably Jammu and Kashmir. The long-held concept of retaining 'strategic autonomy', at least notionally, is being set aside by India with the deepening of its defence partnership with the United States.

In his book *India and Asian Geopolitics: The Past, Present*, Former Indian Foreign Secretary Shivshankar Menon argues against the logic of aiming to transform India into a superpower without first making it prosperous and strong within. He states that there are no existential threats to India from abroad. If there are threats to India's existence, they are primarily internal.

## **China and Pakistan**

China–Pakistan relations have been consistently strong and are based on mutual respect, non-interference in internal affairs and have witnessed smooth development over the past seventy years. Both enjoy a high degree of mutual trust and share the objective of regional and global peace and stability. Although both are characterised as ‘iron brothers’ yet they are not ‘allies’ in the military sense. China has assisted Pakistan in all domains and always advised Pakistan to improve its relations with India and have the best of relations with the United States.

At present, both China and Pakistan are working to stabilise the situation in Afghanistan after the withdrawal of US/NATO forces. The CPEC’s extension to Afghanistan could make a material difference to the lives of the Afghan people and provide a distinct opportunity to bring Afghanistan into the mainstream of cooperative partnerships for development in Central Asia.

## **India and South Asia**

India is the largest country in South Asia with a population of 1.3 billion, GDP of \$2.6 trillion and per capita income of \$2,625. It has requisite potential to become a driver of economic growth in the region. However, under the present BJP government, India has veered towards a hyper nationalistic trajectory and is being fast transformed into a Hindu state, discarding its secular credentials and ignoring the fundamental wellbeing of its citizens, particularly minorities. Almost one-third of India is facing insurgencies, income inequalities have accentuated, and social convulsions triggered by institutionalised discrimination, poverty and ideological zealotry have created internal instability.

While domestic disharmony is affecting India’s development, it has suffered setbacks in its relations with states in its immediate neighbourhood. India’s obsession with Pakistan and its proclivity to be dismissive of the interests of the smaller states in South Asia that resent its hegemonic attitude and arrogance carries costs and actually retard its efforts in becoming a global power. India’s relations with Nepal, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and even Maldives (until late) have been strained. Bhutan, which is virtually an Indian protectorate, has also recently warmed up to China.

## **India and Pakistan**

In Indian strategic conception, the entire region extending from Afghanistan to Myanmar is India’s strategic space. The present political frontiers of India do not correspond with India’s strategic frontiers. India’s leaders see Pakistan as a principal impediment to its greatness. The main objective of the Indian strategy is to undermine Pakistan. Isolating Pakistan is a declared policy objective of the Indian government.

Pakistan has held India to a regional equation thus impeding its quest for global status. Pakistan–India hyphenation is based on rough strategic parity and historic rivalry that is continuously fuelled by Jammu and Kashmir and other disputes. For the BJP, Pakistan is a domestic issue. It has played the Pakistan card to win votes.

The Indian establishment has pursued two-fold approaches towards Pakistan: one, not to engage with Pakistan in the hope that a smaller and weaker Pakistan will self-destruct, and two, to manage Pakistan from a position of strength by all means – ‘surgical strikes’, Cold Start; and fomenting terrorism and insurgencies in Pakistan.

On 5 August 2019, India took illegal, unilateral and military measures to dissolve the State of Jammu and Kashmir, under its occupation, and incorporate its two parts—Jammu and Kashmir, and Ladakh—into Indian Union territories. The entire population of Jammu and Kashmir was put under military siege and local leaders arrested along with thousands of Kashmiris. India now faces a full-blown rebellion against its occupation of Kashmir. These developments have led to downgrading of diplomatic relations between Pakistan and India and suspension of bilateral trade. The South Asian process of regional cooperation under SAARC is on hold.

In a recent study titled “India’s Path to Power in a World Adrift”, Former Foreign Secretaries Shivshankar Menon and Shyam Saran have joined other notable scholars in expressing concern on the current Indian domestic and strategic orientations. They note that “Indian democracy is moving steadily towards ethnic majoritarianism, polarisation and divisiveness...an autocratic conception of power...cumulative consequences of these developments could be grim...combination of low growth, limited inclusion, ethnic majoritarianism and political centralization will enmesh India in internal conflicts that would, at once sap its resources, and also undermine its international aspirations” (Aiyar et al. 2021). The study makes a convincing case for regional economic integration; promotion of SAARC; and better management by India of its sub-continental neighbourhood.

### **India’s military**

India was the third largest military spender in the world in 2020, behind only the United States and China. “India’s military expenditure was USD 72.9 billion...India is the world’s second-largest arms importer just behind Saudi Arabia” (Drishti IAS 2021).

According to Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, India is estimated to have an arsenal of 90–110 nuclear weapons (SIPRI n.d.a). This figure is based on calculations of India’s inventory of weapon-grade plutonium and the number of operational nuclear-capable delivery systems. India’s nuclear weapons are believed to be plutonium-based. As of 2015, India’s weapon-grade plutonium stockpile was estimated to be between 0.57 and 0.61 tonnes.

In 2021, India also reportedly tested MIRV capability with Agni-5. India has made significant strides in acquiring anti-ballistic defence systems including S-400 from Russia. India’s space program is ambitious and taken off in a big way. India has acquired nuclear submarines.

Shortly after testing nuclear weapons in 1998, the Indian government said that the country “will not be the first to initiate a nuclear strike, but will respond with punitive retaliation should deterrence fail.” This commitment was included in India’s nuclear doctrine in 2003. Under current doctrine, India reserves the option to use nuclear weapons under limited



circumstances: if it is attacked with biological or chemical weapons or if a weapon of mass destruction is used against Indian forces outside Indian territory.

Vipin Narang, a professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology has “argued that India’s no-first-use policy has ‘far greater flexibility’ than generally recognized and that India could strike first if it considers a Pakistani strike to be imminent” (Sanders-Zakre and Davenport 2017).

Indian leadership has been prone to irresponsible nuclear rhetoric for domestic political and electoral purposes. On April 21, 2019, in Barmer (Rajasthan), Prime Minister Narendra Modi said in a public rally that India’s nuclear weapons are not for celebrating ‘Diwali’, while boasting that India had the capability to launch nuclear attacks from land, air and sea. On April 22, 2019, addressing an election rally at Patan in his home state of Gujarat, Prime Minister Modi said that he was ready to launch 12 missiles on Pakistan in a “*qatal ki raat*” – “a night of bloodshed.”

### **India–US defence partnership**

India has acquired a special status as a US defence partner since the signing of the Indo-US nuclear deal in 2006. In 2016, the United States designated India as a Major Defence Partner. Commensurate with this designation, in 2018, India was elevated to Strategic Trade Authorization Tier 1 status, which allows India to receive licence-free access to a wide range of military and dual-use technologies regulated by the Department of Commerce.

US–India defence trade cooperation continues to expand with the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA), Communications, Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA), and the Industrial Security Agreement (ISA) now in place. The total US defence trade with India increased from near zero in 2008 to over \$20 billion in 2020. The United States is committed to further streamlining US–India defence sales through both the Foreign Military Sales (FMS) and Direct Commercial Sales (DCS) processes. BECA or Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement enables India real time access to American spatial intelligence.

It is evident that India is pursuing great power status at least in hard power like the erstwhile Soviet Union. It is for India to decide if it has the capacity to pursue such a course, which no doubt has accruable costs. Pakistan has not objected to the Indo–US strategic partnership. Pakistan seeks a separate trajectory of a broad ranging cooperative partnership with the United States.

### **Pakistan**

Pakistan is a medium-sized, democratic, nuclear weapons power of some 226 million people, situated at the crossroads of South and Central Asia with proximity to the Middle East and the Strait of Hormuz.

Pakistan has been impacted by turbulence in its adjoining regions. For the past 40 years Pakistan has been directly affected by the developments in Afghanistan – first the Soviet

invasion of 1979 and the freedom struggle, then the post 9/11 war on terror and the US/NATO intervention in Afghanistan.

However, a more pernicious and pervasive threat to Pakistan's security is posed by India with which the unresolved issue of Jammu and Kashmir remains a constant source of tensions interspersed with active hostilities. Indian efforts at hegemony have been resisted by Pakistan, which meant developing adequate strategic and conventional capabilities.

"Pakistan is estimated to possess about 100–120 nuclear weapons for delivery by aircraft and land-based missiles. It is widely believed that, in peacetime, Pakistan stores its nuclear warheads separate from their delivery vehicles" (SIPRI n.d.b). Pakistan has developed a range of nuclear capable ballistic and cruise missiles. Pakistan also has a modest space program. The sophistication of Pakistan's strategic capabilities is recognised by experts. Its safety and security programs and procedures are known to follow the best practices.

Acquisition of new high technology weapon systems by India from the United States and introducing nuclear weapons at sea will compel Pakistan to react and thus fuel an arms race. Pakistan was compelled to develop tactical battlefield nuclear weapons as an assured means to deter a conventional attack and nullify India's Cold Start doctrine. Pakistan's nuclear doctrine of credible minimum deterrence was consequently modified to full-spectrum deterrence at minimum credible levels.

The National Command Authority (NCA) of Pakistan in 2017 expressed "full confidence in Pakistan's capability to address any form of aggression. The NCA reiterated Pakistan's policy of developing and maintaining Full-Spectrum Deterrence, in line with the policy of Credible Minimum Deterrence and avoidance of arms race" (Inter Services Public Relations Pakistan 2017). The Indian air strikes at Balakot in February 2019 prompted a quick riposte by the Pakistan Air Force. Pakistan's readiness to provide a well-calibrated response was meant to disabuse the Indian leadership of the notion of military strikes against Pakistan.

It is essential for Pakistan to maintain a stable strategic equation with India. Pakistan's nuclear program is India-specific. A corollary to this specificity is that Pakistan and India could take mutual and reciprocal measures to build confidence and mutual restraint at conventional and strategic levels to avoid conflict, including nuclear conflict.

India has not been receptive to discussing with Pakistan issues related to nuclear stability and confidence building in South Asia. A memorandum was signed at Lahore in 1999 during the visit of Prime Minister Vajpayee which inter alia called for discussions between India and Pakistan on doctrinal aspects of their respective nuclear programs; arrangements against nuclear accidents and setting up of a hotline between New Delhi and Islamabad. Subsequent conversations at the Foreign Secretaries level and the experts' group on strategic issues yielded no progress. The dialogue process is now stalled.

The only CBMs in place between the two countries are – non-attack on each other's nuclear facilities, exchange list of nuclear sites on the first day of every calendar year, pre-notification of ballistic missile launches, agreement on measures to reduce the risk of accidental and unauthorised nuclear use, and hotline between Director Generals Military

Operations (DG MOs), as well as flag staff meetings in the field. Hotlines between the two Prime Ministers as well as Foreign Secretaries remain dormant.

The propensity for vertical escalation of hostilities is high and nuclear threshold is low. The dangers of a nuclear conflict between India and Pakistan are high as compared to other regions of the world. Pakistan also faces sub-conventional threats from India, which has tried to destabilize Pakistan internally by sponsoring insurgencies and terrorism throughout the country.

Pakistan wishes to have good neighbourly and cooperative relations with India based on mutual respect, sovereign equality and mutual interests. Peaceful resolution of the Jammu and Kashmir dispute is necessary. It is not possible to place this issue on the back burner as it involves the lives and suffering of tortured people. Readiness to address this issue could open multiple avenues for bilateral cooperation.

In February 2021, the militaries of Pakistan and India in a joint statement recommitted themselves to the 2003 ceasefire arrangement at the Line of Control and agreed to address the 'core issues' that could undermine peace and stability. The agreement took effect from midnight of 24 and 25 February 2021. The two sides also agreed to revive the existing mechanisms—hotline contact and flag meetings—for dealing with any unforeseen situation or misunderstanding.

Pakistan has decided to give priority to its economic development and adopted an economic security strategy. Pakistan's Chief of Army Staff, General Qamar Javed Bajwa outlined the economic security vision at the Islamabad Security Dialogue in March 2021 (Dawn 2021a). In a major peace gesture to India, he stated that "it is time to bury the past and move forward. But for the resumption of the peace process or meaningful dialogue, our neighbour will have to create a conducive environment, particularly in Indian Occupied Kashmir."

Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi outlined Pakistan's stance to no longer take part in geo-political competition and rivalries, and instead pursue "co-existence and win-win cooperation" (Dawn 2021b). Prime Minister Imran Khan stated that Pakistan could not fully exploit its geo-economic potential unless it improved its ties with neighbours by strengthening trading connections and establishing peace in the region. The Prime Minister said the Kashmir issue was the lone irritant standing in the way of better ties between Pakistan and India (Syed 2021).

On 14 January 2022, Pakistan's National Security Policy was unveiled by the Prime Minister. Its key significance is that Pakistan will henceforth prioritise economic and social development in terms of its internal and external focus and allocation of resources. The main objective of all national endeavours would be development with a human centric security with dividends accruing to the citizens. Peace within and in the region is a sine qua non for realising this objective.

Pakistan believes that peace and stability in South Asia can be achieved through:

1. The resolution of the disputes between Pakistan and India, first and foremost, the resolution of the Jammu and Kashmir dispute in accordance with Security Council resolutions and the wishes of the Kashmiri people;
2. The maintenance of a balance of conventional and strategic military forces between Pakistan and India; and
3. Reciprocal measures for nuclear and missile and military restraint between the two countries.

These proposals for a strategic restraint regime in South Asia remain on the table.

Geo-economics, as is also evident from the above, also connotes peace with India. The offers of peace by the Pakistani leadership have not been taken up by India so far. Geo-economics also connotes reverting to the historical 'normal'. Central Asia–South Asia economic, trade and cultural cooperation that had existed over centuries was interrupted with the advent of European colonialism in the 19th century.

Pakistan's geo-economic vision brings these regions closer to rekindling these centuries old connections. India should demonstrate its political will and join Pakistan in grasping this opportunity just as China and Russia are bringing dreams of Eurasian connectivity closer to fruition.

At the global level, Pakistan attaches great importance to multilateral processes for strengthening international cooperation and the rule-based order. It has supported initiatives for the reform of the UN system and favours expansion in the non-permanent membership of the Security Council. As a medium-sized country, situated in a volatile region, Pakistan would like to have more frequent opportunities to serve on the Council. Pakistan has opposed any expansion in permanent membership, as it is non-democratic, against the principle of sovereign equality and only a means to further entrench a privileged club.

Pakistan has historically played an active and constructive role in the Conference of Disarmament (CD) with a view to promoting realistic arms control and disarmament measures for ensuring equal and indivisible security for all countries. Pakistan has also been a proponent of a regional approach to disarmament and, as mentioned above, is amenable to developing a strategic restraint regime with India bilaterally.

As a nuclear-weapons state, Pakistan is interested in the membership of the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG). Pakistan has considerable expertise in the peaceful uses of nuclear technology and has a vast nuclear energy generation program, under the IAEA safeguards. Pakistan would meet requisite criteria for NSG membership, if such a non-discriminatory approach were to be devised.

In the wider Asian region, Pakistan values the role of the ASEAN and seeks Full-Dialogue Partnership. Its Vision East Asia Policy seeks to prioritise building mutually beneficial economic and trade partnerships with ASEAN states. In Central Asia, Pakistan actively works bilaterally and within the Shanghai Cooperation organisation (SCO) and the Economic Cooperation organisation (ECO) to promote closer economic regional integration.

## Recommendations

Although prospects of bilateral or trilateral cooperation for nuclear and strategic stability between China and India as well as Pakistan and India are not yet there, it is appropriate to sketch out recommendations, in the hope that a starting point could be found.

### India and China

A bilateral dialogue between India and China on issues of stability in the Asia-Pacific should begin officially after a process of Track 2 or Track 1.1 conversations, so as to enable both sides to better understand each other's intent. The process of China–India informal summit meetings such as in Wuhan (2018) and Chennai (2019) was useful and could theoretically be revived. The ASEAN Regional Forum, the Shanghai Cooperation organisation and the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia may also be the appropriate forums to develop broader processes on strategic stability and security issues in the broader Asian region. China and India may consider utilising such opportunities with a view to pool their efforts for devising confidence-building measures and defining the norms and principles that should guide the search for a viable system of Asian security.

The China–India border dispute has well-established bilateral mechanisms for management of differences and devising modalities for resolution. These mechanisms should be enabled to deal with the LAC issues, in the interim, to redress mutual concerns with a sense of urgency.

Where appropriate, leaders of both countries may consider providing mutual assurances about their respective adherence to their No-First-Use nuclear doctrines and non-use of force against each other on land, sea and outer space.

Both sides should commit themselves to joining their respective efforts for forging development partnership on the basis of mutual interests and in promoting cultural and educational cooperation as well as agree to end and refrain from hostile propaganda against each other.

India's interests in joining the NSG on the basis of a criteria-based non-discriminatory approach (enabling simultaneous membership for Pakistan) could be worked out and should be considered in consultation with the United States and other NSG members.

Simultaneous admission of India and Pakistan to the NPT as nuclear weapon states needs consultations. It is not likely to be doable but warrants examination of political implications and legal modalities. This could be a subject of China–India bilateral consultations.

### India and Pakistan

The convening of the SAARC summit in Islamabad with the participation of the Prime Minister of India could provide a good opportunity for a bilateral meeting between Pakistan and India. It could enable the beginning of the process of rapprochement by restoring the Composite Dialogue at the Foreign Secretaries level between the two countries, in

accordance with the well-established agenda that inter alia includes the key issue of Jammu and Kashmir and to address mutual concerns about terrorism. A top-down approach may be agreed by the two leaders to steer the bilateral process of cooperation in multiple domains, notably steps for settlement of differences and disputes and economic and trade cooperation.

A Pakistan–India vision statement could be issued along with a Plan for Action to attain common and agreed goals especially in the domains of trade and economic cooperation and addressing common regional challenges by 2047, the centenary year of the independence of two countries.

India and Pakistan should agree to addressing their respective concerns with regard to strategic stability in the nuclear and conventional domains with a view to building mutual confidence and reinvigorating existing mechanisms and establishing dedicated channels for handling nuclear-related contingencies and to provide mutual assurances. Both Pakistan and India will benefit by promoting regional cooperation under SAARC and inter-regional economic cooperation between South Asia and Central Asia. In this context, India needs to review its position on CPEC and instead of opposing it, avail the opportunities CPEC Plus may provide to Indian businesses.

To address Pakistan's concerns regarding conventional asymmetries and induction of new weapon systems, a joint working group may be established for providing such information that addresses these concerns and is mandated to review and improve on existing understandings and agreements related to conventional forces. India and Pakistan should realise that their respective interests coincide in promoting the goals of non-proliferation globally and both can play a leading role in reviving multilateral cooperation at the UN, Conference on Disarmament and at the IAEA, if they pool their efforts and stop working at cross purposes. There is the need for institutionalised engagement and formal dialogue and crisis management mechanisms including regular summitry and reviving comprehensive dialogue while also expanding to include multiple civil and military levels between the two countries.

The United States, China and Russia will find it expedient to encourage Pakistan and India to work towards establishing cooperative and good neighbourly relations by resolving their differences and disputes, notably the Jammu and Kashmir dispute, peacefully in accordance with the aspirations of the Kashmiri people.

### **China–India–Pakistan**

A trilateral official process for strategic stability, although desirable, is inapplicable realistically in the overall environment. A major rethink by India of its strategic orientations towards China and Pakistan is indispensable for this to happen. China, India and Pakistan Track 2 processes on issues of strategic stability would be useful.

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