

# Nuclear Dimensions of India-China-Pakistan Strategic Triangle

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## ABSTRACT

The nuclear dimension of the triangular relationship can be traced since the early 1960s following the entry of China into the nuclear club in 1964 and the steady nuclearisation of India and Pakistan since 1970s that reached its logical end in May 1998. In this strategic triangle, China views its nuclear programme geared against a world threat, India perceives its requirement only as a regional imperative and Pakistan needs it only to balance its conventional inferiority against India. The purpose of the paper is two folded. First, it attempts to explore the motives of India, China and Pakistan for acquisition of Nuclear weapons and secondly, it brings into limelight the Nuclear Policy adopted by these three countries.

**Keywords:** India, Pakistan, China, Nuclear, Policy

## Introduction

In Asia, the nuclear dangers in contemporary times revolve around three nuclear weapon powers. Among them, China is a recognised member of the nuclear club under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty<sup>1</sup> (NPT). While as India and Pakistan are outside the NPT regime but are considered as states having nuclear capabilities and nuclear weapons. The status of India has been acknowledged through the civil nuclear agreement between India and the US, which later came to be recognized by the Nuclear Suppliers Group<sup>2</sup> (NSG) after lifting restrictions on nuclear trade in 2008. On the other hand, Pakistan's status of nuclear weapon state still remains outside this fold (Banerjee 2010). Also, a substantive strategic literature has been focused on the nuclear policies and postures of India and Pakistan after the two countries conducted nuclear tests in May 1998. But, their integral link with China in transforming the nuclear environment of South Asia is a critical component that needs to be adequately examined (Bano 2015).

### India's Motives for Acquisition of Nuclear Weapons and its Nuclear Policy

India after attaining independence in 1947 did not show active ambitions of attaining nuclear capability as well as refrained from joining either of the two power blocs. Also, the then prime Minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru took a very public as well as vocal stand against nuclear weapons (Rajagopalan 2009). Despite this, the government of India established a department of Atomic Research in 1954. The 1962 crushing defeat of India in the border war with China, Chinese nuclear test of 1964, China's threat to intervene in 1965 India-Pakistan war and the existing nuclear powers refusal to provide a security guarantee<sup>3</sup> to India, finally led India to abandon their antinuclear posture. In addition, India refused to sign the NPT and instead tested its first Peaceful Nuclear Explosion (PNE) on 8 May, 1974 (Ganguly and Kapur 2010). Though the nuclear test confirmed that India retained the capability to develop nuclear weapons in the future, but at the same time, the government of India also made it clear that it had no intention of developing nuclear weapons at that time. The PNE thus served to be an 'option policy' for India (Marie and Shinichi 2003).

Moreover, domestic problems in India at that time began to appear on the scene due to the declaration of national emergency from 1975-77 by the then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. Also, her defeat in the 1977 national elections

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<sup>1</sup> Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) is an international treaty signed in 1968 in order to prevent or stop the supply of nuclear weapons and technology to non-nuclear states. Also, it aims to promote cooperation only in the peaceful uses of nuclear energy as well as to achieve the goal of nuclear disarmament. This treaty recognises only five countries as nuclear weapons states including the US, USSR, UK, France and China (which are also the five permanent members of the UN Security Council).

<sup>2</sup> Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) is a group of nuclear supplier states concerned with reduction of non-proliferation of nuclear weapons by controlling the export of nuclear materials that may be applicable to develop nuclear weapons as well as improve safeguards and protection on existing materials.

<sup>3</sup> When the NPT came into existence in 1968, China had achieved a status of nuclear-weapon state, but India had not. At that time, India sought security guarantee from both the US and the USSR in the event of a Chinese nuclear attack. While, both of them rejected, this in turn led India not to participate in the NPT.

led to a change of position related to nuclear development. Her successor, Morarji Desai (a staunch opponent of nuclear weapons) assumed the office and publicly assured that India under his government would not conduct nuclear tests (Rajain 2005). However, the Indian nuclear programme was back on track in 1980 when Indira Gandhi again comes to power. Moreover, with the continued reports of Pakistan's secret nuclear programme, India also increased the funding of the DRDO (Defence Research and Development Organisation) as well as instituted an Integrated Guided Missile Development Programme (IGMDP) in 1983 (Chengappa 2000).

In 1988, it is said that the then India's Prime Minister, Rajiv Gandhi, ordered the development of nuclear weapons (Sidhu 2000). From then onwards, India started its full scale development of delivery systems, and carried out the first test of intermediate-range ballistic missile namely 'Agni' in 1989. However, it was the indefinite extension of the NPT in 1995<sup>4</sup>, Chinese continued assistance to Pakistan and the conclusion of Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) in 1996<sup>5</sup> that pushed India's option policy towards nuclear testing (Marie and Shinichi 2003). In this context, the then India's Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee in 1996 asserted that India will not compromise its national security and sovereignty. He further said that "We do not wish to see India blown apart by Pakistan or China because we did not possess the deterrent nuclear power". Thus, it was under Vajpayee's regime that India conducted two rounds of nuclear tests in May 1998. The first test took place on 11 May, 1998, in which three devices have been tested at the Pokhran underground testing site, which were followed by two more tests on 13 May, 1998 (Charnysh 2009). Immediately after the nuclear tests, Vajpayee wrote a letter to US President Clinton by stating that "we have an overt nuclear weapons state on our borders, a state which committed armed aggression against India in 1962" (Chellaney 1998). Apart from China's threat, India was also much worried about the transfer of nuclear and missile technology from the former to Pakistan that contributed to a deterioration of the security environment of India (Hindu 1998). Thus, India's central motive for acquiring nuclear weapons apart from other factors was China in particular and Pakistan in general.

However, it is believed that nuclear weapons in India are not weapons of warfighting but are political weapons and their sole purpose is to deter the threat of use of nuclear weapons by India's antagonists. As Atal Bihari Vajpayee in a statement in Parliament in May 1998 stated that "India is now a nuclear weapon state.....We do not intend to use these weapons for aggression or for mounting threats against any country; these are weapons of self-defence, to ensure that India is not subjected to nuclear threats or coercion." On 17 August 1999, the first draft of nuclear doctrine was prepared by the National Security Advisory Board (NSAB) chaired by K. Subrahmanyam and handed over to the government (Kanwal 2014). Although, the doctrine has not been yet authorized as an official government document but it currently represents the best compromise among the several disparate views within India. The doctrine specifies the 'credible minimum nuclear deterrence'<sup>6</sup> and 'no first-use' of nuclear weapons as the crux of India's nuclear policy. However, it specifies credible minimum nuclear deterrence in such a way so that the minimum credibility should not hinder the process of development and research. In this context, India's the then External Affairs Minister, Jaswant Singh stated that since India had declared a halt on nuclear tests but the development and research that includes within its ambit the spheres of computer simulations and sub-critical tests would continue (Marie and Shinichi 2003).

The 1999 doctrine suggested that India would not make use of nuclear weapons first as well as will not use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear countries. It further emphasised the need for credible nuclear forces in order to survive a first strike against the country and stressed upon the need for strict political control over nuclear forces. However, the government of India released a brief press statement on 4, January 2003 (of just 349 words) that revealed some aspects of the India's 'official' nuclear doctrine (Rajagopalan 2009). The 2003 statement made three significant changes to the 1999 doctrine: First that the nuclear retaliation to a first strike would be massive as well as designed to cause unacceptable damage. Secondly, the grounds for nuclear retaliation would extend to an enemy's nuclear attack on Indian forces any where even in UN peacekeeping operations. Lastly, in case of a major attack against

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<sup>4</sup> In 1995, the NPT was extended indefinitely and the nuclear weapon states promised the determined pursuit of progressive and systematic efforts to achieve nuclear disarmament. Also, the NPT regime could not recognise India as a nuclear weapons state and the latter decided to stay outside the proceedings and even did not seek an observer status (Rajain 2005).

<sup>5</sup> On 24 September 1996, the United States, China, the United Kingdom, France and Russia signed the CTBT which prohibits the test of all nuclear weapon explosions in all environments i.e, in the atmosphere, under water and in outer space (UNIDIR 2009).

<sup>6</sup> Credible minimum nuclear deterrence is the minimum force that can be deployed to deter other but would also be survivable and credible. As Barry Buzan (1993) defined it as "a secure second strike force of sufficient size to make threats of Assured Destruction credible. It needs to be credible in order to deter and needs to be minimum in order not to provoke a devastating and expensive arms race" (Zahra 2012).

India or its forces anywhere by chemical or biological weapons, it would retain the option of retaliating with nuclear weapons (Hagerty 2014).

#### **Pakistan's Motives for acquisition of Nuclear Weapons and its Nuclear Policy**

Pakistan after attaining a status of separate state in 1947 looked to have been pursuing only civilian nuclear capabilities which began with participation in the US Atoms for Peace initiative<sup>7</sup> (Weiss 2003). However, it was in October 1954 that Pakistan announced its plan for establishing an Atomic Energy and Nuclear Research Institute (Singh 2006). Later, in 1955, Pakistan constituted a 12 member Atomic Energy Committee in order to advise the government on the peaceful uses of atomic energy (Khan 2012) and in 1956, the Pakistan Atomic Energy Commission (PAEC) was established (Ahmad 1957). In the early 1960s, Pakistan established an Institute of Nuclear Science and Technology which became operational in December 1965 (Sinha and Subramanian 1979).

However, the India-Pakistan war of 1965 evolved as a turning point in Pakistani decision making to acquire the nuclear capability as the war showed the disparity between the two countries military capabilities. Also, the desire of Pakistan to attain the possession of nuclear weapon were enhanced by deteriorated relations with New Delhi as well as its conventional inferiority against India vis-à-vis to earn the prestige of being the first Muslim country to acquire the nuclear weapon (Charnysh 2009). But, Pakistan's determination to acquire its own nuclear weapon was strengthened by India's first nuclear test in 1974. At that time, the then Pakistan's Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto considered the nuclear program of India as an instrument for threatening Pakistan as well as establishing hegemony in the subcontinent. Also, he said that "If India builds the bomb, we will eat grass or leaves, even go hungry, but we will get one of our own" (Sarkar 2013). With these ambitions, Pakistan opted China's assistance which is being reported to provide a blueprint as well as enough weapons grade uranium for making a bomb to the former.

On the other hand, the nuclear programme of Pakistan requires large sums of money which was unaffordable by Pakistan at that time. In this context, Pakistan raised its 'Islamic identity factor' to get the necessary fund required for its nuclear programme from the Muslim countries like Saudi Arabia and Libya (Khan 2012). Meanwhile, in 1979, the US stopped its economic and military aid to Pakistan in view of its quick technological progress and nuclear ambiguity. However, the ban on aid was lifted only after three years as Pakistan remained a staunch ally of US against communism in the region. Again in 1985, the US passed the Pressler Amendment in order to slow down Pakistan's nuclear growth vis-a-vis barring all US aid to Pakistan until the state proved that it has no devices of nuclear explosion. Instead, the chief nuclear scientist of Pakistan, Dr. Abdul Qadeer Khan admitted in an interview with an Indian journalist in 1987, that Pakistan had the ability to produce nuclear weapons. Finally, in 1998, only two weeks after India tested nuclear devices, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif declared that Pakistan had successfully tested five nuclear devices and later announced that whether the country is recognised as a nuclear power state or not, but it is in fact a nuclear power (Charnysh 2009).

Thus, the sole rationale of Pakistan for acquiring nuclear weapons was to neutralise India's conventional military superiority (Ghosh 2001). As stated by the former Foreign Minister of Pakistan Agha Shahi, that the object of the nuclear weapons programme was "to equalise, to compensate our military imbalance that hangs like a sword of Damocles over the head of the nation which cut our country into two in 1971". Also, Pakistan's missile development is entirely guided by the logic of targeting India. In addition, the nomenclature given to its missile systems are India-centric as well as its nuclear arsenals are designed in such a manner as to ensure an assured deterrence against India (Banerjee 2010).

However, the nuclear forces as well as strategy of Pakistan has been firmly controlled by the army vis-à-vis has been largely incorporated into the military strategy. This shows that the nuclear weapons of Pakistan are mainly 'military weapons', which can be possibly used in the battlefield rather than adding its deterrence capability. Moreover, Pakistan's refusal for signing an agreement regarding 'no first use' policy with India exposed the former's mindset that views nuclear weapons as weapons of war (Ghosh 2001). Although, Pakistan has not expressed its official nuclear doctrine or deterrence, but it is assumed that the country has maintained a minimum nuclear deterrence primarily aimed to deter both nuclear and conventional aggression of India.

As against India, Pakistan has adopted a policy of 'first strike' but with the provision that use of nuclear weapon will be a last option if survival is threatened. It means Pakistan has kept the right to use nuclear weapons in response to what it supposes as threatening moves. However, what it supposes to be a threatening move has been deliberately left ambiguous. The adoption of such an undefined policy but clear first-strike as Pakistan's 'unofficial doctrine' has two folded motives. First, there are limited financial means of Pakistan and maintaining a first-strike nuclear force becomes cheaper to build than a second-strike force. The second motive of Pakistan behind the first use policy is

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<sup>7</sup> The Atoms for Peace Initiative was launched by the US to distribute nuclear technology and materials in order to develop peaceful uses of atomic energy to many countries in the world having less advanced research.

aimed at being an equalizer as it had recognised India's conventional superiority over force size (Liebl 2009). Although, Pakistan has no official doctrine but in January 2002, the then Director of Pakistan's Strategic Plans Division of the Army, General Khalid Kidwai stated that Pakistan would make use of nuclear weapons against India if it conquers a large part of Pakistan's territory, damaged a large part of its military forces, strangled Pakistan economically or even causes large scale internal subversion in Pakistan (Ganguly and Wagner 2004).

**China's Motives for Acquisition of Nuclear Weapons and its Nuclear Policy**

In the post 1949 period, China felt uncomfortable in the global system that was entirely dominated by two power blocs and it was in no position to challenge either of them. Since the 1950s, it was engaged in direct military confrontation with the US in the Korean War and has to face American hostility in the form of diplomatic isolation, economic sanctions and military pressure (Rajain 2005). Thus, China's concern about nuclear coercion were majorly driven by its experience in the 1950's, when the US threatened Beijing with the use of nuclear weapons in the context of Taiwan strait crises and Korean War (CSIS 2013). In addition, the Chinese Premier Mao Zedong stated in 1956 that we should develop nuclear weapons, and "we also need the atom bomb," (Chansoria 2013). Also, "If our nation does not want to be intimidated, we have to have this thing." It is against this backdrop that China developed its own nuclear weapon and became a nuclear power with its first test of a fission device in Xinjiang at Lop Nor on 16 October, 1964.

Primarily, China has taken assistance from Soviet Union in developing nuclear weapons program (Fogg 2006), but due to the Ussuri River incident<sup>8</sup>, the Soviet technicians left in mid-1960 and the relations began to worsen between the two. After this, it became necessary for China to adopt an active defensive posture vis-à-vis USSR. However, in present times, China sees no major military threat from the Soviet's successor i.e, Russia that would require a level of nuclear contingency planning. On the other hand, its one and only focus in its nuclear deterrence posture is determined by the capability and policy of US (Banerjee 2010).

The genesis of nuclear weapons program of China supports the idea that nuclear weapons cannot be used successfully to contest or win an armed conflict. Instead, the primary purpose of its nuclear arsenal is to counter and prevent any foreign military coercion. The nuclear experts and leadership of China believes that if it is attacked with nuclear weapons or if China's nuclear weapons are attacked with conventional weapons, a portion of China's nuclear arsenal could survive these attacks which gives an option to retaliate with nuclear weapons. Such a credible ability to retaliate with nuclear weapons is what Chinese leadership believes is required to release them from the threat of any foreign military coercion (Kulacki 2011).

Primarily, China after attaining the status of a nuclear power state in 1964 did not disclose its nuclear doctrine. However, it has maintained a nuclear policy that features a minimum deterrent as well as no-first use pledge aimed at avoiding the costly nuclear arms race (Zhang 2012). Also, it may be pointed out that the only stated position about the possession of these weapons were to prevent coercion and blackmail by the other nuclear powers mainly the US and then the USSR. Also, it is believed that China's nuclear strategy has other objectives which include: maintaining the superpower status, deter other nuclear regimes and securing the moral and political domination over its regional rivals (like India) (Rajain 2005).

However, the nuclear doctrine and strategy of China has been clearly articulated in 2006 in comprehensive Defense White Paper. While claiming to follow an entirely defensive policy, it states that its principle objective is to deter other countries from using or threatening to use nuclear weapons against China. The White Paper as released in 2006 explains that:

"China remains firmly committed to the policy of no first use of nuclear weapons at any time and under any circumstances. It unconditionally undertakes not to use or threaten to use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear weapon states or nuclear-weapon-free zones, and stands for the comprehensive prohibition and complete elimination of nuclear weapons. Also, China upholds the principles of counterattack in self-defence.....and aims at building a lean and effective nuclear force capable of meeting national security needs....maintains a credible nuclear deterrent force. China's nuclear force is under the direct command of the Central Military Commission (CMC)....It has never entered into and will never enter into a nuclear arms race with any other country" (Banerjee 2010).

Thus, China's declared nuclear doctrine gives an impression that it has adopted a defensive and no first use nuclear policy.

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<sup>8</sup> The conflict took place at a border outpost on the Ussuri River in the eastern region of the USSR, when troops from China and Soviet Union fire on each other. The Soviet Union claimed that Chinese soldiers crossed the border between the two nations and attacked a Soviet outpost, killed and wounded a number of Russian guards. This was the first incident between the two communist countries which later became a reason for worsening their relationship.

### **Conclusion**

The three countries i.e, India, China and Pakistan have experienced the prolonged tensions with nuclear adversaries and crises under the shadow of nuclear weapons but all the three countries have yet consistently retained non-deployed postures. In this nuclear triangle, India sees China as an immediate challenge while as China looks at India as a potential competitor down the road. On the other hand, the relations between India and Pakistan are outright antagonistic. India perceives Pakistan as a small power and conventionally weak, challenging India with the help of external ties but for Pakistan, India is an enduring enemy. Thus, it is clear that this nuclear triangle represents a very complex set of linkages and co-relations vis-à-vis the renewed interest of US in India as a counterbalance to China further complicated the triangular relations. In this context, it is perceived that the Indo-US nuclear deal has not only escalated the arms race in the region, but has also negative consequences for strategic stability in South Asia.

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