

South Asia and the Concept of Strategic Stability

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Abstract

After the May 1998 nuclear tests in South Asia conducted by both India and Pakistan and declaring themselves as Nuclear Power the entire region of South Asia has become one of the most strategically tensed zone of the world. Its worthwhile here to say that both the above countries have chronic bilateral disputes along with severe tension on their border.

On the other hand the complex border dispute between India and China simultaneously a Pak-China association against India make the things more challenging for the strategic balance and maintaining peace and stability in this region.

The present work examines and analyses various theoretical aspects of strategic balance in South Asia with the expectations it shall help the concerned researchers and keen students to their studies.

Key Words: South Asia, Strategic Stability, Nuclear Power, Pak-China Association, Chronic Bilateral Disputes.

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1. STRATEGIC BALANCE: DEFINITION AND CONCEPT

Strategic balance in chess is described as a situation in which one's opponent's advantages are compensated for by developing one's own advantages; the position is then deemed balanced. Only once the position's equilibrium has been upset does one player have an uncompensated advantage, and this player may assault with the purpose to win^[1]. The balance of power theory, according to M Sheehan^[2], regards international society as uneven; power versus weakness. However, this fundamental imbalance among nations may be balanced, that is, all states can be held in check respecting each other's stance, preventing hegemony and allowing states to keep their identity, integrity, and independence, as well as perhaps discouraging aggression or conflict.

A situation in which long-term and short-term (or high risk and low risk) elements, factors, or objectives are prudently blended to produce a desirable degree of equilibrium, according to the classic definition^[3]. The word & quot strategic balance & quot refers to the two sides' relative ability to fulfil their respective strategic objectives in reference to the other^[4]. The goal of balancing is to keep a growing power from taking hegemony, and if and when that endeavour is successful, a balance of power is assumed to exist.^[5]

2. HARD AND SOFT BALANCING

Conceptually strategic balance can be achieved through hard balancing or soft balancing. Hard balancing is a behaviour in which states form and maintain military alliances to balance a stronger state or check the rise of a potential threat. According to T V Paul, ^[6] traditional hard balancing appears to be present only in conflict-ridden parts of the world, such as the Middle East, South Asia, and East Asia, where long-standing rivalries remain. In South Asian context, Pakistan has been hard balancing India while India is making efforts now to close down their defence gap vis-à-vis China. Soft balancing refers to non-military kinds of balancing that have been seen since the Cold War's conclusion, notably during and after the 2003 Iraq War. Soft balancing happens when lesser governments determine that a stronger state's domination and influence are undesirable, but the greater state's military superiority is so overwhelming that traditional balancing is not viable, if not impossible. Soft balancing is used to undermine, delay, and increase the cost of unilateral action for the stronger state, rather than to physically change the balance of power. Soft balancing is accomplished through a combination of economic, diplomatic, and institutional means. States can participate in soft balancing through many mechanisms, such as tacit understandings or partnerships.

3. INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL EFFORTS

Another method to consider balancing is through internal and external efforts and means. Internal balancing include measures to increase a state's authority by expanding economic resources and military capability in order to be able to respond to a prospective hegemon with independent capabilities and compete more effectively in the international system. For example, India is modernising its defence forces with a focus towards indigenisation as part of Aatma Nirbhar Bharat as well as gaining momentum in improving its 'Comprehensive National Power' for internal balancing to meet its challenges. External balancing is done by forming alliances / strategic partnerships with other states to deter the rival states. Growing challenges in the Indo-

Pacific and resultant convergence of the littoral countries to form alliances amongst themselves or with other major stakeholders is an example. Accordingly Strategic Balance of a country is the achievement of a desired state in critical strategic space over a time horizon which enables it to pursue its national interests and strategic objectives vis-a-vis its competitors from a position of relative advantage. This is essential to prevent hegemony. Further the process entails internal balancing which is as a result of Comprehensive National Development (CND), external balancing formed out of alliance as also strategic partnership, soft balancing as a result of economics combined with cultural relations and finally asymmetric balancing including disruptive instruments. Asymmetric balancing refers to subnational actors and their state supporters' efforts to confront and undermine existing nations by asymmetric measures such as terrorism.

4. STRATEGIC BALANCE IN SOUTH ASIA

4.1 Current Dynamics of Strategic Balance in South Asia

The current dynamics of Strategic Balance in South Asia is governed by certain important aspects. Turbulent and unstable Af-Pak region, Sino-India mistrust, Pakistan's support to terrorist networks, Sino-Pak bonhomie, unstable political situation in Nepal, and role of major powers especially the increasing Chinese footprints in South Asia have ramifications on the region's strategic stability. Further, the geopolitical developments in regions adjoining South Asia; namely the rise of ISIS in West Asia, ongoing Ukraine imbroglio and increasing Chinese assertiveness in South China Sea too impact the region. Not surprisingly, therefore, South Asia is invariably viewed by many observers and strategists as an explosive 'flashpoint' in global politics.

Geographically, China is not a part of South Asia but its engagement with South Asian States and strategic nexus with Pakistan makes it an important player in the region. China has the potential to alter the strategic balance in South Asia. Former Indian Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh stated in 2010 that China wished to establish a foothold in South Asia and that India should be cognizant of this fact. He said that China may be tempted to utilise India's soft underbelly (neighbourhood), the Kashmir problem, and Pakistan to maintain India in a state of low-level equilibrium^[7].

From India's perspective, strategic security may be represented as concentric rings, with the country's defensive perimeter located not at the country's border, but at the outer borders of its regional neighbours^[8]. China's gravitational pull is being experienced by Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka. However, the smaller South Asian countries, for their part, use China as a regional balancer against India. The need to create a credible balance to India's comparably vast capabilities had drawn them to China, with the goal of acquiring stronger negotiating leverage in dealing with India's political, economic, and security challenges^[9]. Though the situation is rapidly improving in India's favour, it has resulted in China's geographic proximity to the area, as well as its rising military, economic, and diplomatic presence in South Asia, compromising India's strategic interests in the region.

India-China relations had improved after the 1962 war, though marked by 'mistrust' and 'suspicion'. China's military posturing in Tibet, strategic forays in the Northern Areas and Indian Ocean and nuanced policy on No First Use (NFU) ^[10] are issues of strategic concern for India. China also has a strategic partnership with India's traditional foe, and the China-Pakistan nexus has been at work to limit Indian influence not only in South Asia but in Central Asia as well. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor which shall pass through disputed areas shall give China access to Arabian Sea through Pakistan's port of Gwadar. Chinese forays in Northern areas of POK have the potency of assuming a security dimension. While a smaller and resource less Pakistan has always tried to seek a status on par with India, China has been trying to keep India engaged in South Asia so that it can emerge as the predominant power in Asia.

It is realistic to assume that China's foreign and defence policies will continue to aim to lower India to the status of a sub-regional power by growing Chinese influence and control in the South Asian geographical region^[11]. Instability in India's periphery tends South Asia to socio-political turmoil which can be exploited by inimical state and non-state actors using inter-alia asymmetric capabilities to harm India. US sees India as a strategic partner in Asia ^[12] and as a potential balancer to rising China. However, there are issues of divergence between India and US like climate change, trade barriers; US lenient stand on cross-border terrorism from Pakistan and transfer of high-end military technology to India. These issues can be ironed out through astute diplomacy, as was the case in Indo-US nuclear deal.

Keeping the nature of US relations with Pakistan and the Chinese assertiveness in view, it would be unrealistic to expect US to get directly embroiled in the South Asian strategic quagmire. However, the geopolitical situation is changing at a very rapid pace.

4.2 Chronic Instability between India-Pakistan and China

The next major issue for regional stability is chronic instability between India and Pakistan, the two nuclear armed states, which is a cause of major concern. This insecurity has manifested itself in extreme form on several occasions, with two states fighting four major wars since their independence in 1947. Pakistan continues its nuclear brinkmanship and wage a proxy war against India over Kashmir issue. Jihadi terrorism and nuclear weapons have increased the risks of hybrid wars in the region. India follows a 'no first use' policy in its nuclear doctrine while Pakistan advocates the doctrine of 'first strike' ^[13]. India's Military superiority and nuclear deterrence is challenged by cross-border terrorism sponsored by Pakistan.

While the 'strategic mistrust' in India-Pakistan and India-China relationship can be explained by realist theory of international relations ^[14], the economic interdependence between these countries has not given expected results, especially in context of India-China. India's engagement in the region is now certainly evolving at unprecedented pace as compared to the past. India's ambition to play a proactive role in giving the necessary governance and leadership structure to a region marked by fragmentation and conflict is a challenge, but it is also a must for the country to achieve global pre-eminence. India, the biggest player in the region is now certainly punching as per its weight in its desire to stand on the pedestal of regional leadership.

However, India's ambitions have been confronted by external and internal challenges which do pose challenges to India's leadership in the region. However, what primarily goes in India's favour is its ability to govern the diverse and multi-ethnic states which benefit better through democracy rather than through repressive and authoritarian regimes. Apart from governance, India is better at creating the & quot software & quot of development namely technology, law and services. Since all South Asian countries are multi-ethnic states, India can become a role model of development for them by better managing its society and economy. Further, it must be noted that India being a democracy naturally finds acceptance with other democracies like the US, Japan, Australia, South Korea and other European countries. Moreover, India by virtue of its size, geographical location and economic growth is a pre-eminent power in South Asia. India is considered as the third largest economy in purchasing power parity terms [15].

According to C Raja Mohan [16], Asia is witnessing the consolidation and emergence of powerful nationalisms that are less receptive to integrative impulses born of economic imperatives. This makes overcoming Asia's profound historical animosities difficult. Furthermore, unlike in Europe, there is no widespread agreement throughout Asia that liberal democracy is the sole acceptable form of government. Barring India, the South Asian countries are struggling to institutionalise strong and effective democracy. These two factors explain the challenges to regional co-operation in South Asia. Furthermore, China's String of Pearls Programme in the Indian Ocean Region, with hopes to increase its global geostrategic position, has introduced a new dimension to regional rivalry [17]. The underlying purpose/intention of China is to project its power overseas and protect its oil shipments [18]. Recently, China has also mooted the idea of Maritime Silk Route. Creation of transportation corridors along Eastern and Western strategic flanks of India has political dimensions.

Though there are a number of factors influencing the strategic stability of South Asia; in the present geo-political environment, it is the Af-Pak region that remains the arc of vulnerability [19]. While the security dynamics of an unstable Af-Pak region remains a cause of global concern; policy directives reflecting international resolve seem to be missing. In Afghanistan, Pakistan's role in politics of dispute resolution and continued instability is adversely impacting regional security dynamics of South Asia and other regional states as well.

5. CONCLUSION

South Asia is one of the world's most populous and highly inhabited geographical areas. Despite its extensive historical, cultural, and political ties, the region requires improved mutual understanding and, as a result, integration. There exists a perpetual stress due to misgivings in the not so cordial bilateral relations amongst the countries of the region. A revitalised South Asia, particularly India, has the potential to substantially enhance the lives of its 1.7 billion residents – roughly one-fourth of all mankind. While South Asia's lack of desired evolution as a cohesive region can be attributed to a variety of factors including terrorism, strained bilateral relations, and a lack of military and strategic cooperation, India's own engagement in the region requires further strengthening, despite having evolved significantly over the years, particularly under PM Modi's leadership. External and domestic problems have hampered India's objectives.

Externally, ongoing tensions with Pakistan, uncertainty over Afghanistan's future, and the influence of other actors, particularly China, all pose difficulties to India's rise as a regional leader. India also confronts new threats from politically unstable Nepal and the Maldives, a decreasing Sri Lanka, and a Bangladesh that occasionally faces difficulties of Islamic radicalism. These have security consequences that should be considered.

Emerging threats to strategic stability in South Asia are threatening global and regional peace and stability in the current geopolitical context. As a result, nations in the region must identify particular areas of shared difficulties and potential in order to develop regional collaboration, such as infrastructure, energy, water, trade, climate change mitigation, higher education, healthcare, terrorism, and even military cooperation. However, the region is expected to continue in its current status of 'Unpleasant Stability' for the foreseeable future. This unusual type of stability stems in large part from the incapacity of both India and Pakistan, the region's two major actors, to achieve desired political objectives on the one hand, and rising Chinese advances into India's strategic neighbourhood on the other.

Strategic stability in South Asia is vital for emerging India's own growth, peace and stability. However, despite India's endeavours to assume regional leadership; its proactive policies in the region shall remain marginalised due to interests of extra regional players like China, growing religious fundamentalism and dynamics of partisan bilateral relations. Though, the situation certainly has the potential for rejuvenation. An emerging India with global ambitions should continue to engage the regional countries on multiple fronts. India's overall nonaligned and soft power approach can bring solutions to divergences within the region, stimulating global and regional peace and stability by 'Bridging Gaps'.

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