**Deterrence and South Asia**

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Adil Ahmed Dar triggered an unintended and unprecedented chain reaction in the history of the two nuclear-armed states in South Asia. The Indian air raid deep into Pakistani territory and the reaction by the latter resulted in the first-ever direct air skirmish between the two nuclear states since the advent of the nuclear age in the last century.

It is definitely an unprecedented and alarming development. Arguably, the recent military adventurism between the two arch-rivals has fundamentally challenged the conventional logic of nuclear deterrence. The much-trumpeted deterrence value of nukes stands greatly discredited in the context of Pakistan and India whose direct air clash dangerously defied the cardinal principles of nuclear deterrence.

To put into perspective the floundering nuclear deterrence in South Asia, it is pertinent to revisit the core premises of the concept of nuclear deterrence. Deterrence means dissuasion by the threat of grave consequences for the aggressor. This implicit and mutual understanding ensures mutually assured survival sustained by the fear of mutually assured destruction in case of a nuclear exchange between the two nuclear-armed belligerents.

It is important to note that deterrence theory is far from being perfect. Since no two nuclear states have ever engaged in a direct military confrontation involving nuclear weapons, none of the cardinal assumptions of the concept has been derived from an empirically-tested and proven theory. The existing theory is premised on deductive reasoning rather than inductive logic. Military strategists struggle to establish if a limited war is possible under a nuclear umbrella. What constitutes a nuclear threshold for a state? How long can nukes sustain rational behaviour? These are the million-dollar questions that remain to be answered by the deterrence theory that continues to evolve with changing dynamics and drivers of nuclear policies and posture of states with nuclear arsenal.

However, what is important to note is that the exercise of rational behaviour by a nuclear-armed state is central to the whole notion of nuclear deterrence. Nuclear weapons induce psychological effect only if an opponent is a rational actor and wants to continue to exist by thinking through the consequences of any act of aggression against an enemy nuclear country. Nukes do not automatically deter outbreak of a military conflict unless a nuclear-armed state acts rationally due to certainty of mutually assured destruction in case of the armed conflict escalating into a nuclear exchange.

The brazen Indian air strike in Balakot is illustrative of the abandonment of rational behaviour supposed to be induced by nuclear weapons of Pakistan. Thus, the Indian military planners resorted to the punitive air incursion without calculating the cost of switching on the conflict escalator that could have led to a nuclear apocalypse. Such irrational behaviour by a nuclear-armed nation is in conflict with the principle of rationality that lies at the heart of the deterrence doctrine. The recent Indo-Pakistan military flare-up has put a big question mark over whether the credibility of the enemy’s nuclear arsenal and certainty of MAD yield rational behaviour critical to avert mutual annihilation.

In South Asia, the geographical contiguity leaves absolutely no room for any technical glitch or human error by either country. Such eventuality will end up in the inadvertent nuclear Armageddon due to the very short response time available to the other side for verification of a false nuclear attack alarm that can precipitate nuclear retaliation by the aggressed country.

Most Indo-Pakistan experts attribute the hardening Indian posture towards Islamabad to the upcoming Indian elections and Pakistan’s alleged patronage of Kashmir-centric non-state actors. It is debatable if Indo-Pakistan ties will be cordial once the Kashmir dispute is peacefully resolved. An analysis of the emerging situation in the region suggests that there is more to the Indian muscular approach than meets the eye. Its size, military and economy make India structurally inclined to establish its predominance in South Asia.

This sense of entitlement long harboured by India stands challenged by Pakistan which continues to persistently checkmate the Indian strategic ambition of absolute regional hegemony. Being buoyed by its burgeoning economy and growing military might, India views itself well-qualified for a great power status. The BJP government in New Delhi seems to have decided in principle to sort out its ‘Pakistan problem’ once for all with the combination of aggressive military posture and multi-pronged diplomatic pressure. Seen in this context, the recent Indian military attack was meant to introduce a paradigm shift in its perennially antagonistic equation with Pakistan.

Tellingly, the power transition at global level, is also adversely affecting the power dynamics in South Asia. The US bid to enhance India’s military, diplomatic and technological profile in its strategic quest to prop up a reluctant India as a formidable strategic hedge against China, even if inadvertently, is undermining the fragile strategic balance in the region. The gap between the conventional power of the two South Asian rivals is widening as India now enjoys unprecedented access to cutting-edge American and European military technology as reflected by the Indo-US nuclear agreement and the Rafale jets deal with France. The growing power asymmetry is bound to further lower Pakistan’s nuclear threshold in the event of any full-blown military conflict.

India’s flirtation with the idea of limited military adventure under the nuclear umbrella is a suicidal thought after the introduction of tactical nukes in its military calculus by Islamabad. In case of a nuclear war in the region, Indians and Pakistanis will be the first casualty – leaving behind a living hell for the rest of the world.

The post-Pulwama military developments in the Subcontinent have pushed both the countries into uncharted territory by bringing the two closer to the brink of nuclear war than ever before. The fog of war may appear to have receded, but the war clouds will continue to menacingly hover over the skies in the region.

The international community can no longer be indifferent to the perennial state of conflict between the two nuclear states. There is an acute need for a moral deterrence to be put in place by international pressure which can nudge both the nations to the negotiating table for amicable resolution of bilateral issues.

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