

8th Berlin Conference on Asian Security (BCAS)

***“With great power comes great responsibility”
100 years after World War I – Pathways to a secure Asia***

Berlin, June 22-24, 2014

A conference jointly organized by Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP), Berlin
and Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS), Berlin

Discussion Paper
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***Session II: “War by accident”? –
How to (de-)escalate conflicts with neighbors?***

Prof. Dr. Rajesh Rajagopalan
Jawaharlal Nehru University
Delhi

The Prospects for Conflict, Escalation and War in Asia

Rajesh Rajagopalan

Introduction

A century back, conflict between great powers and the alliances they wove led to a great conflagration. There was nothing inevitable about that war, but it would be foolish to deny that the great power dynamic of the previous decades had not created the conditions necessary for triggering the war. Asia today exhibits some of the same characteristics: great variations between states in terms of power, rapid changes in the power balances combined with hyper-nationalism in many countries. As in Europe then, war is not inevitable but conflicts and crises are, and whether these tensions become shooting wars will depend on leadership and chance as much as anything else. But a key distinction also needs to be kept in mind: the presence of nuclear weapons which induces greater caution among leaders today than of that earlier era. Even if nuclear weapons do not lead to peace, it is undeniable that it introduces a greater measure of caution in how leaders react in crises. There is also a more intricate web of international institutions and norms that bind Asian states today than existed in the past and even if their benefits are frequently exaggerated, they probably do not hurt the possibility of crisis resolution. Below, I briefly outline the sources of insecurity and military modernization, the likely pathways to international crisis and military escalation and how they might be contained.

The Sources of Military Modernization and Insecurity

Asia is not special or different. The factors that are leading to military modernization, arms races and insecurity in Asia can be traced to the two factors that have been common throughout history and in all regions of the world: the extant power differential between states and their differential growth. Territorial issues, identity and other factors are no doubt also important but probably less so. Both South Asia – India's immediate neighborhood – and the larger Asia illustrate these dynamics.

South Asian – and Indian – insecurity is tied, if in different ways, to the gross inequality between South Asian states. South Asia is one of the most unequal regions in the world in terms of the power differential between states within the region. India is a behemoth within the region, with its US \$ 5 trillion (in PPP terms) economy almost five times as large as the rest of the region put together and ten times as large as its nearest competitor in the region, Pakistan. India has grown much faster than the

rest of the region over the last two decades, which has only exacerbated the inequality within the region.

This inequality is an abiding source of insecurity not just to Pakistan but to India's other smaller neighbors. None of India's smaller neighbors, not even Pakistan, have the capacity to counter this inequality on their own which is why they have all attempted to balance India through partnerships with stronger outside powers. But with the exception of Pakistan, India's smaller neighbors have not even been able to attract outside support except occasionally. New Delhi has been slow to understand the consequences of this imbalance and insecurity but has paid greater attention over the recent past, recognizing that the insecurity of smaller neighbors can rebound on India if these smaller neighbors seek the help of extra-regional powers to counter India. The 'Gujral Doctrine' was an attempt to recognize this problem, and the new BJP-led government's invitation to South Asian leaders to attend Prime Minister-designate Modi's swearing-in ceremony bodes well in this regard. Thus, as much as the imbalance is a source of insecurity to India's smaller neighbors, they represent a vulnerability to India about which New Delhi is constantly watchful.

The most serious of India's disputes within South Asia is, of course, with Pakistan. Though India and Pakistan have had territorial disputes from the time that the two countries became independent in 1947, the territorial dispute, especially over Kashmir, tended to mask this more important factor of power imbalance and its consequences for security and stability in the region. Pakistan consistently spent far more than India in terms of proportional defense expenditure, in some decades twice as much. But because Pakistan's economy is much smaller, it has never been able to match India's defense spending. Pakistan has attempted to compensate for this with external balancing, seeking alliances with the US and China as a way of countering its much more powerful adversary. Pakistan's decision to build nuclear weapons was understandable from this perspective: tellingly, the decision to attempt to build nuclear weapons was taken just a couple of weeks after it was defeated and dismembered by India in the 1971 war over Bangladesh.

But nuclearization has not reduced Pakistan's worry about India – it appears to have only opened up another arena of competition. Thus, Pakistan continues to spend far more on its military than it can afford, straining to keep up with the much larger India. On the nuclear front, Pakistan has managed to build an arsenal that is thought to be slightly larger than India's and refuses to let negotiations even begin on a fissile materials treaty in the Conference on Disarmament because it argues that such a treaty would lock-in India's natural advantages.

As the imbalance shifted against Pakistan, it has resorted to asymmetric means of countering India, in particular by supporting terrorism. Though this has increasingly

been counterproductive, faced with a relatively weak domestic economy and fickle allies, Islamabad is unlikely to completely abandon this option. As the US troops withdraw from Afghanistan, Pakistan has stepped up its quest for 'strategic depth' by pursuing a favorable outcome there, which is defined as an Afghanistan without Indian influence.

If Pakistan's military modernization is single-mindedly India-focused, India's is much more diverse. India's military modernization has been afflicted by the same corruption and incompetence as the other sectors of the government but it has been driven, as in China's case, by the larger kitty available but also by the need, primarily, to keep up with China, and secondarily, with Pakistan.

For India, the combination of Pakistan's nuclear capability and its support for terrorist groups represents a threat to which it has yet to find a solution. Even accounting for the two-front problem that India faces, Indian military forces are already much stronger than Pakistan, though Pakistan is still a focus of Indian military modernization. The problem that India faces is not in building military forces but bringing it to bear on a nuclearized Pakistan, which could result in either deliberately or unintentional nuclear escalation. Pakistan's weakness, in a sense, is its greatest strength. Over the last decade, India has attempted to resolve this problem through changes in its military doctrines but these have so far been unsuccessful.

In the larger Asian region, China's spectacular economic growth and its concomitant growth in power represents a serious challenge. The growth of Chinese military power largely reflects its growing economic clout and the greater resources it can devote to strengthening its military power. Nevertheless, the rapid growth of Chinese military power is a cause for concern. India has had a long-standing territorial dispute with China and it fought a brief but disastrous border war with China in 1962. The remarkable growth in Chinese infrastructure has had an impact on the military balance along the Sino-Indian border, with traditional Indian military expectations that China would require a long lead time to prepare for any war in the region now overturned. India has belatedly attempted to improve its own infrastructure in the border areas but this effort has been stymied so far by incompetence in New Delhi.

In addition the growth of Chinese naval power is also a concern. Given the great distances involved and given that both the Indian and Chinese navies were essentially brown water navies, India had not traditionally worried about the Chinese navy. But as the Chinese navy acquires air craft carriers and a capacity to project naval power far from its shores, India has begun to express some concern. Paradoxically, though, the naval arena also offers greater possibility of military-to-military cooperation. Both India and China depend on sea-borne trade and the Sea Lanes of Communications

(SLOCs) from the Gulf region to East Asia are important to both countries. Nevertheless, a significant part of India's naval modernization is being driven by concern about the growth of Chinese naval power.

More troubling has been that the growth in Chinese military power has been accompanied by greater military aggressiveness towards its neighbors, especially in territorial disputes. While this has so far been largely a phenomenon in the China's disputes with Japan and Southeast Asian states, there are indications of some aggressiveness on the Sino-Indian border also. It is unclear if this is simply the consequence of unclear nature of the current Sino-Indian border line (which in large parts are demarcated) or whether it presages a more aggressive military posture.

Another aspect of India's military modernization that is China-centric is the gradual development of India's nuclear arsenal. This is not in response to any new Chinese capability but simply a reflection of the imbalance between the capabilities of the two sides. China has had nuclear delivery capabilities that can cover all of India for decades. India is only now developing such capabilities, mainly in the form of long-range missiles. Covering all of China from central or southern India would require missiles with a range of at least 7000 kilometers, which India does not yet have. India is developing such capabilities, however, and over the next decade, India can be expected to deploy such capabilities.

Equally worrying for New Delhi is China's larger political objectives and its apparent willingness to undermine Indian interests, whether through its strategic alliance with Pakistan or in other ways such as undermining Indian ambitions regarding the UN Security Council or even, more minimally, Indian efforts to join the Nuclear Supplier's Groups (NSG).

Set against these strategic concerns are mitigating factors. Beijing represents an important economic opportunity for India that no Indian leadership will easily dismiss. In addition, New Delhi hopes for a multipolar turn to the international order, no doubt in the expectations that it will be one of the poles in any such emergent order, but one which suggests cooperation with other like-minded powers such as China (and others of the BRICS coalition). India's dominant left-of-centre political culture also continues to be suspicious of engaging with the West in any "alliance" against others, even those such as China with which India has significant unresolved disputes.

Thus, Indian military modernization is being driven by at least three factors: the availability of greater resources because of a growing economy, the need to match Chinese military modernization in general but also specifically on the Tibet plateau, and by the need to maintain a deterrence posture against Pakistan. An emergent worry for Indian defense planners is the remote (but not ignorable) possibility of a two-front

war either because of collusion between China and Pakistan or because of circumstances.

The Probability of Escalation

Military modernization in the South Asian region and in Asia in general has already led to increased tension, balancing efforts and a few crises, especially between China and Japan and China and some of its Southeast Asian neighbors. What are the prospects of crisis and escalation involving India and South Asia?

Most obvious is the likelihood of a major terrorist attack in India or targeting Indian interests that emanates from Pakistan is sufficiently serious that it prompts an Indian response. India has so far been constrained in responding to such outrages in the past because of the concern that any Indian escalation might not be manageable and the fear that Pakistan might escalate to the nuclear level. Hillary Clinton narrates in her recent book that Indian leaders warned her that a repeat of an incident like what happened in Mumbai could lead to an Indian retaliation. This remains a possibility but as suggested earlier, India faces severe restraints in responding to such attacks because of Pakistan's nuclear capability. There is little to suggest that India has devised any appropriate response yet, but this does not mean that India – especially under the new dispensation – will not respond.

A second source of crisis and escalation is the possibility that a border incident, either between India and Pakistan or between India and China gets out of control and leads to a wider war. The Pakistan army continues to provide fire cover and support for terrorists infiltrating into Kashmir and such fire-fights could easily escalate. We cannot also rule out the possibility that the Pakistan Army attempts another operation like the one in Kargil in another sector of the LoC.

On the Sino-Indian border, the undemarcated nature of much of the border frequently leads to confrontation between Indian and Chinese forward forces. Though there are a number of CBMs to deal with such issues, these have not always helped in the past. Improved border infrastructure, especially on the Chinese side, allows for greater deployment of forces that increases the risk of escalation, a risk that would increase as Indian infrastructure also improves in the coming years. India is also planning to deploy new military forces, both army and air force, along the China border. The increased forward deployment of forces on both sides of an unclear border line increases the risk that small incidents could escalate to a wider war.

A third, but somewhat less likely possibility is a deliberate choice to go to war. Though this might be rated less likely than the other two possibilities, it cannot entirely be ruled out. The Kargil War was a deliberately planned conflict and its

planners appear not to have thought through all the likely consequences of the war. Chinese actions in the East and South China Seas appear again to be very deliberate and though they do not appear to be planned to lead to war, it very well could.

Could alliance dynamics, an important cause for the First World War, cause conflict in the region? Though some form military alliance relationship does exist between China and Pakistan, it appears improbable that Beijing will want any part in an India-Pakistan war. On the other hand, Pakistan might feel great temptation to take advantage of a Sino-Indian war, though this would not be the consequence of an alliance.

Avoiding Escalation and War

How might crises, escalation and war be avoided? India has a number of bilateral agreements with both Pakistan and China that are based on the lessons of the Cold War, of other regional conflicts and some that are unique to the requirements of the region. These include a variety of 'hotline' agreements at various levels between the political, diplomatic and military hierarchies on all sides as well as a number of agreements that can reduce the likelihood of misunderstandings, including agreements about limiting military movements near the border areas as well as about testing weapons in each other's direction. But these have not really been tried out in a serious crisis, or else, as in Kargil, they have not been particularly effective. Unlike the Cold War CBMs, these exercises have no verification protocols and depend on mutual good behavior, reducing their effectiveness. International attention is claimed to have helped contain some previous crises between India and Pakistan but these are necessarily ad hoc efforts, and it is not even certain that these were decisive.

One key limit to crises escalation so far has been the presence of nuclear weapons. Though it might be difficult to measure how much of a role nuclear weapons played in preventing the Cold War from turning hot or in preventing wars between major nuclear powers, the caution induced by the presence of nuclear weapons represents a significant difference with the conditions that European powers faced in the run-up to the World Wars.

There is clear recognition on at least the Indian and Pakistani sides that nuclearization limits their freedom in crises. This was best demonstrated during the Kargil crisis. Nuclearization did not prevent Pakistan from embarking on the venture (indeed, it might have encouraged it), but once full scale war started, both sides found themselves bound in ways they had not been in pre-nuclear days. Pakistan could do little to reinforce its forces on the Kargil heights or to support them as they were being pummeled by Indian air power but India, equally, was forced to limit its

operations to the Indian side of the Line-of-Control, constraints neither side had observed in very similar circumstances in previous wars in 1965 or 1948.

But while nuclear deterrence and the fear of escalation can limit crisis escalation, there are a couple of caveats that need to be noted. One is that some major potential conflict dyads – the Sino-Japanese one, for example – are not covered by mutual nuclear deterrence (if we ignore the US extended deterrence cover).

A second, more serious concern is that much of the presumed escalation-preventing prowess of nuclear weapons is based on the experience of the US-Soviet Cold War dyad. But the structure of the nuclear arsenals in Asia are very different from that of the Cold War. The inflated arsenals of the two superpowers and the ever-ready command and control systems of the two sides meant that even the smallest crises carried with it the potential for nuclear escalation – nuclear escalation was almost automatic, or at least the two powers behaved as if they were. The positive consequence was that the two sides went to great lengths to prevent any direct confrontations. But the Asian nuclear arsenals, including China's, are not only much smaller but are married to much more cautious command and control systems that emphasizes central political control than the speed of execution. These represent far safer and much more responsible command and control structures but paradoxically, the reduced risk of escalation also means that there *could be* less of an incentive to head off crises and war.

A third problem is that even in nuclearized conflict dyads, nuclear weapons might not come into play because the kind of potential conflicts that represent the greatest danger of escalation and war are very limited wars over small territories that are likely to remain at the conventional level. The probability that nuclear weapons might have some role in a border conflict between India and China or even between India and Pakistan are rather low. Nuclear weapons might not have much of a pacifying effect in such conflicts.

Conclusion

The differentiated and rapid growth of wealth and power has increased insecurity, a familiar dynamic in international politics. This does not necessarily have to lead to war, but it will result in greater insecurity, tension and crises, and it carries with it the potential for an escalation to war. Nuclearization has induced greater caution and dampened some of the potential for escalation, but this is a benefit that does not play across all conflicts dyads in Asia.