SOUTHERN (DIS)COMFORT

Southern Asia's Escalating Strategic Competition

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Editor's Note: Welcome to the first installment of "Southern (Dis)Comfort," a new series from War on the Rocks and the Stimson Center. The series seeks to unpack the dynamics of intensifying competition—military, economic, diplomatic—in Southern Asia, principally between China, India, Pakistan, and the United States.

The United States has spent the first decade of the 21st century consumed by "hot wars" in Afghanistan and Iraq until the Obama administration, in recognition of China's growing economic and military might, sought to "pivot" to the Asia-Pacific. Now, once again, the potential deployment of more troops to the rapidly deteriorating "stalemate" in Afghanistan, along with the human catastrophe in Syria, the U.S.-led military campaign against ISIL, and North Korea's rapidly advancing missile program are likely to limit the Trump administration's bandwidth to recognize some of the larger tectonic shifts over the horizon and the risks they bear.

Though comparatively unnoticed in Washington policymaking circles, "Southern Asia" and the broader Indian Ocean region form one of the most competitive strategic environments in the world. This article is the first installment of "Southern (Dis)Comfort)," a series organized with the Stimson Center's South Asia Program to unpack the range of competitive dynamics in Southern Asia today.

The region matters a great deal because it hosts multiple major nuclear powers, some of the world's largest and most powerful conventional militaries, dozens of terrorist organizations, 40 percent of the globe's population, and one of the highest volumes of trade alongside critical maritime chokepoints. China is increasingly being drawn into Southern Asia's competition through its expanding arms sales and technology transfers, economic investments, and naval presence. India and Pakistan remain bitter rivals locked in a search for escalation dominance while deepening their respective alignments with great powers. Moreover, during the past year, Southern Asia has witnessed two separate militarized border crises — "surgical strikes" across the Line of Control in Kashmir and the ongoing Doklam standoff — that had (or have) the potential to escalate to full-scale war between nuclear powers.

Competition is a natural byproduct of states navigating an anarchic world, reducing uncertainty, coping with changing military technologies, and countering evolving or intensifying threats. To address these threats to their security, states turn to various types of balancing: converting economic and other national resources into greater military capabilities (internal balancing); building new or deepening existing alignments (external balancing); and leveraging economic and diplomatic tools to stymie adversaries and maximize advantage (soft balancing).

These balancing concepts provide a useful starting point for disentangling and understanding four domains of escalating competition in Southern Asia: strategic doctrines and capabilities, maritime security, great-power partnerships, and diplomatic friction.

Strategic Doctrines and Capabilities

The principal area of Southern Asia competition has revolved around strategic capabilities and doctrine. This cycle of strategic competition appears to increase the risk of accidental or inadvertent escalation with every passing year.

Two crises with Pakistan — the 1999 Kargil Conflict and the 2001 to 2002 "Twin Peaks" Crisis — initially prompted the Indian defense establishment to search for a limited war strategy suitable for a nuclearized environment. The Indian Army decided on a new offensive doctrine, known as Cold Start, which an army chief publicly acknowledged for the first time earlier this year. Cold Start envisions rapidly mobilizing military forces, carrying out limited thrusts across the international border, and capturing portions of Pakistani territory — all without crossing Pakistan's nuclear-use thresholds. This doctrine's proponents claim that undertaking such aggressive operations would provide bargaining leverage to compel Islamabad to end its support to militants targeting India.

While the fear of India's conventional superiority made a more aggressive nuclear posture attractive to Islamabad long before any talk of Cold Start emerged, Pakistan has exploited India's flirtation with proactive operations to justify its shift to full-spectrum deterrence. Pakistan's full-spectrum deterrence posture threatens two things: first use of nuclear weapons on the battlefield to deter a conventional Indian advance and third use of long-range, nuclear-armed missiles to deter India from retaliating massively to Pakistan's first use of tactical nuclear weapons. The Nasr, a 70-km range tactical nuclear weapon, and the Shaheen-III, a 2,750-kilometer ballistic missile, embody this doctrinal shift.

Pakistan's embrace of full-spectrum deterrence seems to be prompting Indian security managers to consider a change to India's nuclear targeting strategy. A former senior national-security official has suggested that India might entertain a "comprehensive first strike" to disarm Pakistan in the event that it moved Nasr batteries into the field during a crisis. This might seem like a fantastical proposition today, but New Delhi is steadily acquiring counterforce capabilities and is investing in ballistic missile defense, potentially bolstering confidence in its damage-limitation capabilities.

The fear of Indian damage limitation appears to be incentivizing Pakistan to pursue countermeasures that enhance the survivability of its arsenal and, therefore, the credibility of its third-strike capability. In January of this year, Pakistan tested the nuclear-capable Babur-III submarine-launched cruise missile and the Ababeel, which is capable of lofting multiple independently targetable — re-

entry vehicles. Possessing more survivable capabilities — whether sea- or land-based systems — could ameliorate "use it or lose it pressures," but also could enable the use of tactical nuclear weapons on the battlefield to the extent it convinces Pakistan's leadership that its nuclear forces will survive India's retaliatory second strike. What's more, it is far from clear that Pakistani sea-based platforms will enhance the overall survivability of the country's nuclear arsenal. Pakistani submarines that have been assigned nuclear missions may be more vulnerable than mobile land-based missiles to an Indian attack because New Delhi will know their peacetime locations and may be incentivized to target them early in a crisis.

Maritime Security

A second area of intensifying competition is the maritime domain, partly due to China's expanding presence in the Indian Ocean region through substantial port construction and facility management as well as naval deployments.

The strategic necessity of resolving its "Malacca dilemma" — where its sea lines of communication could be choked — seems to be motivating China's forays into the Indian Ocean. To mitigate this vulnerability, Beijing is in the process of investing more than $1 trillion to connect land and maritime corridors linking the Chinese mainland to the Indian Ocean. The "flagship" project — the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor — is expected to finance $52 billion in energy and infrastructure development in Pakistan.

China's evolving presence in the Indian Ocean has a military component as well. The People's Liberation Army-Navy (PLAN) is constructing a naval base in Djibouti and deploying conventional and nuclear submarines in the Indian Ocean on a regular basis. Chinese assistance may be underwriting Pakistan's shift from a defensive strategy of sea denial to a more offensive "limited sea control" posture with the export of eight Chinese diesel-electric attack submarines to Pakistan.

The case of Gwadar, a Chinese-operated deep-sea port on the Makran Coast, underscores the blurry line between Beijing's commercial and military activities in the Indian Ocean. Whereas Chinese strategists may view Gwadar solely as an alternative energy supply route, Pakistani officials are trying to convince Beijing to establish a joint naval presence at the port, which could make it more difficult for India to engage in coercive naval operations against Pakistan during a future crisis. China has rebuffed these requests thus far, but evolving competitive dynamics could cause a reappraisal of this decision.

New Delhi has begun to respond more deliberately to Beijing's encroachment on its maritime backyard through a buildup of capabilities and collaboration with the United States. In 2015, India's navy inaugurated a new base on its western coast. The Indian navy regularly uses American-made Poseidon-8I Neptune aircraft to conduct surveillance sorties in search of Chinese submarines, capabilities that could be enhanced with sales of Sea Guardian drones to India. Consistent with these trends, maritime cooperation —

exemplified by the annual Malabar exercise — has become the proverbial capital ship in India's foreign policy. This flurry of maritime-focused balancing suggests that long-held assumptions about Indian advantage over the PLAN in the Indian Ocean could be changing, as the development of Chinese bases would mitigate the vulnerabilities of extended lines of communication.

Strategic Relationships

The third major area of competition has been in the deepening of alignments or alliances with major outside powers — namely the China-Pakistan nexus and the Indo-U.S. relationship.

No partnership has been more consequential to regional security than the China-Pakistan "all-weather" friendship. Beijing and Islamabad have long believed that maintaining close ties could enhance their strategic positions vis-à-vis New Delhi, raise the specter in India of having to fight a two-front war, and prevent India ultimately challenging China's apex position in Asia. A deepening China-Pakistan strategic relationship also constrains U.S. efforts to coerce Pakistan into cooperating on military objectives in Afghanistan. Nuclear cooperation — including China's transfer of a nuclear weapon design and weapons grade uranium to Pakistan in the early 1980s — became a major feature of the relationship. Beijing later transferred ballistic missiles to Pakistan, and the two sides have engaged in extensive nuclear commerce with Pakistan in apparent violation of its commitments as a member of the Nuclear Suppliers Group.

In contrast to the longevity of the China-Pakistan relationship, the Indo-U.S. strategic partnership is a recent geopolitical phenomenon. For decades, relations between the two countries remained mired in bilateral disputes over Washington's nuclear-nonproliferation and technology-export policies. The Indo-U.S. civil nuclear deal, concluded in 2008, confirmed that the two sides were serious about surmounting this history. India and the United States still find themselves at loggerheads on key foreign-policy matters, but the overall trajectory is unmistakable. New Delhi and Washington robustly affirmed in 2014 their commitment to freedom of navigation in the South China Sea while the most recent joint statement, released during Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's first bilateral summit with President Donald Trump in June 2017, adopted Indian positions on cross-border terrorism and China's controversial Belt and Road Initiative.

India and Pakistan have cultivated additional balancing partners in recent years. The Modi government's "Act East" policy and mutual concern over China's strategic ambitions have resulted in New Delhi and Tokyo drawing ever closer. India and Japan have called on China to "show utmost respect" for "freedom and safety of navigation and over-flight" in the South China Sea. Last year, the two

sides concluded a civilian nuclear deal, a signal that strategic considerations are outweighing nonproliferation concerns, a major shift for Tokyo. Islamabad and Moscow have put aside Cold War enmity to sign a defense-cooperation agreement and, in 2016, conducted joint military exercises for the first time.

Diplomatic Friction

Increased diplomatic friction, particularly in multilateral institutions and settings, offers a final indicator of intensifying competitive dynamics in Southern Asia as exhibited through three diplomatic showdowns in the past year.

New Delhi orchestrated a bold campaign to join the Nuclear Suppliers Group, a 48-country cartel that sets the international rules of civil nuclear commerce, last year. The bid was unsuccessful, largely due to Beijing's intransigent opposition. While New Delhi may have simply miscalculated the strength of Beijing's opposition, its gambit clarifies the nature and stakes of the strategic competition to domestic and foreign audiences, potentially buttressing support for more explicit balancing vis-à-vis China.

Islamabad continues to resist — with Beijing's diplomatic backing — New Delhi and Washington's calls to crack down on anti-Indian militants operating within its borders. The U.N. Security Council 1267 Sanctions Committee designated Jaish-e-Mohammed as a terrorist organization after its attack on the Indian Parliament in 2001. New Delhi introduced a resolution in the U.N. Sanctions Committee in 2016 to enact an individual designation against Jaish leader Masood Azhar, but Beijing blocked the effort on Pakistan's behalf.

Most recently, India snubbed China's own multilateral efforts by being the only major Asian country not to attend China's Belt and Road Forum in May 2017. Some speculate this backdrop — plus New Delhi's drift into Washington and Tokyo's strategic orbit —may be fuelling the current China-India spat over Bhutan that has the Indian and Chinese militaries squaring off meters apart with significant risks if miscalculation and escalation.

The Bottom Line

The core takeaway for U.S. policymakers and analysts is that Southern Asia's strategic environment is evolving and discomforting. As competition intensifies at such a breakneck pace, it becomes difficult for states to interpret essential information — such as allies and adversaries' new capabilities, objectives, strategic decision-making organization, and resolve — that otherwise might help avoid crisis escalation or a more consequential calamity. It is also hard for states in such a context to form accurate threat assessments or to calibrate their balancing efforts accordingly, all of which could result in heightened negative perceptions, security dilemmas, and conflict spirals intensifying among nuclear-armed powers.

A potential silver lining of these dynamics is that they could ultimately clarify the strategic stakes, opportunities, and risks for all parties. Strategic ambiguity or indifference might finally yield to more focused, multilateral efforts to track and manage some of the more dangerous emerging risks.

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