

South Asian nuclear arms race accelerates amid India-Pakistan standoff

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Recent weeks have witnessed a further intensification of the nuclear arms race in South Asia, with arch-rivals India and Pakistan both carrying out tests of nuclear-capable missiles and making bellicose war threats.

India and Pakistan came perilously close to all-out war last fall, after India boasted it had terminated its policy of “strategic restraint” and would continue to mount military strikes inside Pakistan until Islamabad stops all logistical support for the anti-Indian insurgency in Kashmir.

For two months thereafter, the Indian and Pakistani armies exchanged daily, often lethal, artillery and gunfire barrages across the Line of Control that separates Indian-held and Pakistan-held Kashmir.

While the cross-border firing has now abated, relations between South Asia’s nuclear powers remain fraught and both countries have stepped up their war preparations.

India has reportedly spent more than US \$3 billion (20,000 crore rupees) since September on emergency arms purchases from Russia, Israel, and France. According to Indian press accounts, the purchases include ammunition, engines and spare parts for fighter jets and other aircraft, armour-piercing rockets for battle-tanks, and anti-tank missiles. The ammunition and parts are supposed to ensure that India has the capacity to wage at least 10 days of “intense fighting.”

India’s Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government has effectively frozen all ties with Islamabad since the mid-September attack that Islamist Kashmiri separatists carried out on the Indian Army base at Uri—an attack the BJP, with the full support of India’s political establishment, blamed on Pakistan. In a statement to the Indian parliament earlier this month, External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj said India’s policy is “no dialogue until peace,” i.e., no resumption even of India’s normally frosty relations with Pakistan until Islamabad demonstratively curtails support for the Kashmiri insurgency from its territory.

Flexing its nuclear muscles, India carried out back-to-back tests of two nuclear-capable missiles in December and January. The first, the Agni-V, is the most powerful surface-to-surface ballistic missile in India’s rapidly expanding nuclear arsenal. It is designed to carry multiple nuclear warheads to targets up to 5,000 kilometres (3,100 miles) away. Already, with the Agni-IV, which New Delhi tested for the fifth time on January 2, and which has a range of 4,000 kilometres (2,485 miles), India had the capacity to strike all major Pakistani population centres and military installations even from southern India.

Earlier in 2016, India announced that it had completed the development of a “nuclear triad”—the capacity to launch nuclear weapons from land, air and under water. In August, India commissioned its first nuclear-powered ballistic-missile submarine, the INS Arihant, and earlier last year it successfully tested a submarine-launched ballistic missile, with a range of 3,500 kilometres (2,175 miles), the K-4. India has a second nuclear submarine currently undergoing sea trials and two others are reportedly under construction.

Islamabad responded to India’s latest Agni tests by staging its own tests of missiles capable of carrying nuclear warheads, the Babur-3 and the Ababeel.

On January 9, Pakistan claimed to have staged a successful test of the Babur-3 from an undisclosed Indian Ocean location. An underwater-launched cruise missile, it has a range of 450 kilometres (280 miles) and is designed to hug near the sea and land so as to escape detection.

The Pakistani military claimed the Babur-3’s maiden test was a “measured response to nuclear strategies and postures being adopted in Pakistan’s neighbourhood” and boasted that it gives Islamabad a “second strike capability.” That is the ability to mount a devastating nuclear strike even if an enemy “first-strike” has destroyed all of Pakistan’s land-based nuclear facilities and incinerated much of its population.

Unlike India, Pakistan does not possess nuclear submarines. As a result, it will be forced to deploy the Babur-3 in diesel-electric submarines, which have a much more limited capacity to remain underwater.

On January 24, Pakistan announced it had successfully conducted its first-ever test of the Ababeel, a nuclear-capable intermediate ballistic missile with a range of 2,200 kilometres (1,370 miles). Ababeel is designed to carry multiple nuclear warheads and, according to a Pakistani military press release, has the capacity to “engage multiple targets with high precision, defeating the enemy’s hostile radars.”

Both India and Pakistan are also proclaiming their adherence to aggressive military strategies that increase the prospect of war and of any war becoming a nuclear conflict.

Within days of General Bipin Rawat becoming India’s new army chief last month, he boasted about India’s readiness to fight a “two-front war” against Pakistan and China, and declared that India’s military has adopted Cold Start, a battle plan that calls for India’s military to be able to mobilize and launch a large-scale invasion of Pakistan in just 48 hours.

So provocative is Cold Start that the Indian military long denied it was part of its war planning. Cold Start is aimed at exploiting the large gap in strength between Indian and Pakistani conventional forces. It also is aimed at ensuring India can strike before other powers intervene to try to defuse an Indo-Pakistani war crisis, as happened in 2001-02.

Shortly after Rawat confirmed the Indian military’s adherence to Cold Start, India announced it intends to dramatically expand its tank deployments along the Pakistan border. Senior Indian Defence officials told *IHS Jane’s Defence Weekly* India will deploy upwards of 460 new Russian “main battle tanks” (MBTs) to the border states of Rajasthan and Punjab, where India already has a massive force of between 800 and 1,200 MBTs.

Islamabad has responded furiously to Rawat’s Cold Start claims. Pakistani officials told the London-based *Financial Times* that Islamabad would “use nuclear weapons should India invade Pakistan.” Indeed, Pakistan has justified its development of “tactical,” or so-called battlefield nuclear weapons, on the grounds India is pursuing aggressive strategies like Cold Start to overwhelm Pakistan’s smaller conventional forces.

A recurring complaint from Islamabad is that Washington’s longstanding campaign to build up India as a military-strategic counterweight to China has overturned

the shaky balance of power between South Asia’s nuclear-armed rivals and is encouraging New Delhi to assume an increasingly belligerent posture.

To harness India to its anti-China “pivot to Asia,” Washington has showered strategic favours on India. These include allowing it to purchase advanced US weapons systems and creating a special status for India in the world nuclear regulatory regime that allows India to buy advanced civilian nuclear equipment and fuel, thereby enabling it to concentrate its indigenous nuclear programme on weapons development.

In a recent interview with Voice of America, Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif’s main foreign policy adviser, Sartaj Aziz, warned Washington against further disrupting the “strategic stability” of South Asia. “We have been emphasizing to (the) US,” said Aziz, “that if you start your defence cooperation and arms agreement (with India) in such a way that disturbs our strategic stability then we will have no option but to respond and that is not good for the peace in the region or world.”

Under pressure from an India emboldened by Washington’s support, Pakistan is taking steps that dangerously lower the nuclear threshold. New Delhi, for its part, has signalled that were Islamabad to use tactical nuclear weapons against Indian troops, whether inside Pakistan or amassing to invade Pakistan, it would consider that as an act of nuclear war justifying use of its strategic arsenal, i.e., the unleashing of a nuclear attack on Pakistan’s major population centres.

Pakistan’s attempt to counter India’s nuclear triad by developing its own capacity to launch nuclear missiles from its fleet of diesel-electric submarines adds yet another element of risk.

Stratfor, an intelligence firm with close ties to the US military-security establishment, warns Indian anti-submarine forces will be unable to distinguish Pakistani submarines that are part of its “nuclear deterrent” from those with conventional warfare responsibilities. As a result, Pakistani commanders could misread an Indian attack on the submarines as an “effort to neutralize Islamabad’s sea-based nuclear force” and “fire their nuclear missiles during what might otherwise be a conventional conflict.”



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