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# **NUCLEAR DISARMAMENT IN SOUTH ASIA: CHALLENGES, GLOBAL DYNAMICS, AND PROSPECTS FOR THE 21ST CENTURY**

AUTHORED BY - SAPTARSHI MONDAL<sup>1</sup>

## **ABSTRACT:**

This paper explores the complex landscape of nuclear disarmament in South Asia, particularly focusing on India and Pakistan, the region's two nuclear-armed powers. It outlines the historical evolution of their nuclear programs, the strategic rationale behind their arsenals, and the regional implications of their nuclear capabilities. The study delves into the geopolitical and security concerns that drive nuclear policies in both nations, highlighting how India's rivalry with China and Pakistan's perceived threats from India shape their respective deterrence strategies. Additionally, it examines global efforts for nuclear disarmament and the reluctance of both India and Pakistan to commit to treaties like the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT). The role of external powers, particularly the Indo-US Civil Nuclear Agreement and Pakistan's alliance with China, are scrutinized for their influence on the region's nuclear diplomacy. Despite international pressure, both India and Pakistan maintain their nuclear arsenals due to perceived strategic needs, making unilateral disarmament an unlikely scenario without a comprehensive multilateral framework that addresses the concerns of all nuclear states. The paper concludes that while global disarmament remains a distant prospect, regional stability can be achieved through confidence-building measures and diplomatic engagements.

## **KEYWORDS:**

Nuclear Disarmament, South Asia, India-Pakistan Relations, Nuclear Deterrence, Global Nuclear Policy

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## 1. INTRODUCTION: SOUTH ASIA AS A CONCEPT

South Asia is an etymological term that speaks collectively of the eight nations of the Indian subcontinent: India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, Maldives, Sri Lanka, and Afghanistan. The concept is closely similar to that of the Indian subcontinent; hence, the only partial difference is that the Indian subcontinent can be mainly a geological term, whereas the more political connotation would be South Asia. The Western world mostly perceives South Asia through the lenses of political instability, volatility, and a backward economic region overshadowed probably more than any other by events in the Middle East. However, international reports suggest that South Asia is indeed much more diversified, with significant geopolitical and economic potential. Dismissing South Asia as unimportant can subsequently mean for the Western world its inability to control the challenges that are going to come out of it in the near future, with which global diplomatic relations will be destabilized.

## 2. INDIA AND PAKISTAN: SOUTH ASIA GIANTS

India and Pakistan are the two dominant powers in South Asia. In August 2024, both countries celebrated their 78th Independence Day, as both have a common history of partition and attainment of independence from the British Empire. The last 78 years have seen the India-Pakistan relations dominated by four major wars (1947, 1965, 1971, and 1999), border skirmishes, air strikes, and an ongoing arms race. The tense relationship between them has been one of the main reasons for a heightened sense of tension in the region, as both countries have embarked on nuclear development for their strategic defense.

## 3. OVERVIEW OF NUCLEAR CAPABILITIES IN SOUTH ASIA

According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI)<sup>2</sup>, the number stands at nine countries that possess the bomb. These are Russia, the United States, the United Kingdom, France, China, India, Pakistan, Israel, and North Korea. Only two countries in South Asia, India and Pakistan, have acquired capabilities to nuclear weapons, and their nuclear arsenals have significantly shaped the regional security landscape. On June 17, 2024<sup>3</sup>, when both the countries were rejoicing over Eid, SIPRI came out with a report which will hike up the geopolitical temperature between India and Pakistan. In the past also, Western estimates including those by

<sup>2</sup> 'Home' (SIPRI) <<https://www.sipri.org/>> accessed 15 September 2024

<sup>3</sup> 'Role of Nuclear Weapons Grows as Geopolitical Relations Deteriorate-New SIPRI Yearbook Out Now' (SIPRI, 17 June 2024) <<https://www.sipri.org/media/press-release/2024/role-nuclear-weapons-grows-geopolitical-relations-deteriorate-new-sipri-yearbook-out-now>> accessed 15 September 2024

SIPRI and the International Panel on Fissile Materials have estimated that Pakistan enjoys a slight numerical edge over India in terms of nuclear stockpiles. But an SIPRI report in 2024 arrested India as possessing more substantial numbers of nuclear weapons compared to Pakistan, and that signals a significant change in regional diplomacy.

#### **4. HISTORICAL CONTEXT: EVOLUTION OF THE NUCLEAR PROGRAMS OF PAKISTAN AND INDIA**

The nuclear trajectories of both India and Pakistan have been inextricably linked since their inception. India conducted its first nuclear test, 'Operation Smiling Buddha,' back in May 1974, joining the nuclear club despite international outcry and discouragement, particularly from the United States. In response, Pakistan's then-Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto had sworn in defiance that even if Pakistan had to "eat grass,"<sup>4</sup> it would still make atomic bombs. India conducted its series of first successful nuclear tests, 'Operation Shakti,' on May 11 and 13, 1998. The then Prime Minister, Atal Bihari Vajpayee, announced in the 12th Lok Sabha on May 27, 1998, that India had conducted five underground nuclear tests, declaring itself a nuclear power. In response, Pakistan conducted its nuclear test, 'Chagai,' on May 28, 1998, declaring itself a nuclear state. This was primarily made possible by the rapid escalation of nuclear capabilities in the two countries, thus creating a fragile balance of power in South Asia. Until today, the fragile balance of nuclear deterrence between India and Pakistan has been tested time and again. In 2023, former U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's memoir<sup>5</sup> reveals that the two countries almost slid into a nuclear war following the 2019 strike by India on Balakot.

#### **5. NUCLEAR DISARMAMENT AND GLOBAL EFFORTS**

Seventy years on April 2, 1954<sup>6</sup>, PM Jawaharlal Nehru made a speech in Lok Sabha that put India in the global state of nuclear disarmament. Nehru cemented India's call for Partial Test Ban Treaty and arguably limited on nuclear tests.

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<sup>4</sup> Chaudhry AA, 'Nuclear Deterrence' (DAWN.COM, 26 May 2024) <<https://www.dawn.com/news/1835721>> accessed 15 September 2024

<sup>5</sup> Biswas S, 'India and Pakistan Came Close to Nuclear War: Pompeo' (BBC News, 25 January 2023) <<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-64396138>> accessed 15 September 2024

<sup>6</sup> Malik P, 'A Speech That Put India on the Global Stage' (The Hindu, 2 April 2024) <<https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/a-speech-that-put-india-on-the-global-stage/article68016249.ece>> accessed 15 September 2024

Since the inception of United Nation<sup>7</sup>, it had always focused on multilateral nuclear disarmament to uphold global peace and security. It aims for reduction and eventual eradication of all nuclear weapons; those includes weapons of mass destruction. The first resolution was passed by the United Nation General Assembly in 1946, to address issues regarding atomic energy and aligned concerns. Over the years several multilateral treaties have been signed in United Nation between nations that aims towards nuclear disarmament. Few notable among them are Treaty of Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) 1970, Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) 1996, Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) 2018, and Outer Space Treaty 1967.

### **5.1 TREATY OF NON-PROLIFERATION OF NUCLEAR WEAPONS (NPT) 1970**

It was signed in 1968 and is effective from 1970. It aims to reduce nuclear weapons and promote nuclear disarmament. It further says those nations who are signing, who are non – nuclear weapon states, for them the treaty would pledge to not develop or acquire such weapons.

### **5.2 OUTER SPACE TREATY 1967**

It bans the use of weapons of mass destruction in space.

### **5.3 COMPREHENSIVE NUCLEAR TEST BAN TREATY (CTBT) 1996**

It seeks to ban all nuclear tests both for civilian and military purposes, anywhere anytime in the world.

### **5.4 TREATY ON THE PROHIBITION OF NUCLEAR WEAPONS (TPNW) 2018**

It seeks to ban all developments, testing, and production or use of nuclear weapons.

It is interesting to know that both India and Pakistan have ratified none of the treaties

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<sup>7</sup> Nations U, “Disarmament” (United Nations) <<https://www.un.org/en/global-issues/disarmament>> accessed September 15, 2024

except the Outer Space Treaty. India in response said, such treaties specifically NPT are discriminatory and a threat to its nation's interest. It although speaks for peace but it rather creates two clubs of haves and have nots. It does nothing except legitimising the monopoly a few nations. Similarly, Pakistan have said the same thing and compared it as discriminatory treaty.

## **6. THE INDO-US CIVIL NUCLEAR AGREEMENT: A TURNING POINT<sup>8</sup>**

India initially was not very supported by the western powers regarding its matter on nuclear energy. India faced numerous sanctions from the very first day of its nuclear tests, like from Canada, Japan, USA, etc. it was 2005 when India for the first time was recognised as the responsible nuclear power by the 123 Agreement between United States of America and Republic of India, popularly known as Indo - US Civil Nuclear Agreement 2005. Here India clearly distinguished between military and civil nuclear requirements and USA assured India for cooperation in civil nuclear technology. This agreement made India the only country who hasn't signed NPT but still has the permit to carry out nuclear commerce within the world. Other global powers like Australia, Germany, Japan who initially opposed India as irresponsible nucleus state, after such treaty, they termed India as a 'special case' who has its sovereign right do not join NPT. As per agreement, the nuclear support India will get from outside or US, can't be used to make nuclear weapons or something that breaks the international safeguards. If it happens the support will come to an end. It was meant for nuclear disarmament. A lot of opposition happened, later it was revealed by many researchers that the agreement is an example of legitimising India's nuclear test for weapons of mass destruction. India has sufficient Uranium of its own, to increase its nuclear stockpile what was needed was nuclear support for civil sector, which God from the Indo - US deal. It was one of the great precedents of diplomacy for lot of country. Dr. Kavel L. Afrasiasi described it as a diplomatic boon for India and new start for Indo - US relationship.

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<sup>8</sup> (U.S. - india: Civil nuclear cooperation - state.gov) <<https://2001-2009.state.gov/p/sca/c17361.htm>> accessed 14 September 2024

## 7. PAKISTAN'S RESPONSE AND CONCERNS<sup>9</sup>

Pakistan of course didn't like such deal for India with USA. The Dawn, a prominent Pakistan daily, believes such agreement is a strategic advantage for India, where they would get Uranium from international community for civil requirements and will use their own uranium for weapon development. The then Foreign Minister of Pakistan, Shah Mehmood Qureshi said, such exception should be made for other non-NPT state too. In response that then US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said, Pakistan's history is an example of their characterization as red flag.

## 8. NUCLEAR DIPLOMACY AND RESTRAINT BETWEEN INDIA AND PAKISTAN

Pakistan had although clarified it would follow first use policy for those states who nuclear armed, but no first use policy against non-nuclear weapon states. In January 1991 Pakistan and India ratified India - Pakistan Non-Attack Agreement, which in itself was a very unique that obligates India and Pakistan to refrain from encouraging or participating in nuclear actions that would cause damage. It was ratified by PM Rajiv Gandhi on behalf of India and PM Benazir Bhutto on behalf of Pakistan at Islamabad, Pakistan. It was later ratified by both country's parliament. This agreement later made the first swapping of list of nuclear installations. In February 1999 Lahore Agreement between Indian PM Atal Bihari Vajpayee and Pakistan PM Nawaz Sharif. It further committed to reduce accidental and unauthorised use of nuclear weapons and would try to build confidence for each other. It was ratified by both the country's parliament.

After 1971 war, both states did the first nuclear test on 1998. Just the next year both countries went to war in the Kargil sector of the Himalayan region. But it was quite mature from both the sides that they didn't use a nuclear weapon. India by such has proved its no first use policy and choose to keep the fight on the mountains only. All the reports suggest India kept Mirage 2000 fighter jets ready with nuclear tipped ballistic missile. Recently Pervez Musharraf the then military general of Pakistan in his memoirs have said nuclear delivery system of Pakistan was not operational during the war. Even after 1999 where were many major incidents happened like 2001 Indian parliament attack, 2001 2002 Indo - Pak standoff, 2008 Mumbai attacks, 2016 India's LOC strike, 2019 Balakot air strike, 2022 BrahMos missile incident. Even after such

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<sup>9</sup> Syed BS, "India Leads Pakistan in Nuclear Arms for First Time" DAWN.COM (June 20, 2024) <<https://www.dawn.com/news/1840769>> accessed September 15, 2024

incidence both countries were mature enough to restrain from nuclear strikes. Specifically for the last 2022 BrahMos missile accidental strike deep inside the territory of Pakistan, still Pakistan maintained peace and not retaliated.

In general Pakistan's position on nuclear disarmament is that, it will only give up nuclear weapons if India gives up its nuclear weapons. But India replied to it by saying India's national security policy is not country specific. India further in United Nation said that it believes in nuclear disarmament but that should be for all countries irrespective of non-nuclear country or nuclear country.

## **9. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF NUCLEAR DISARMAMENT PROSPECTS: INDIA AND PAKISTAN**

While analysing nuclear disarmament with respect to Pakistan in comparison to that of India, it is essential to frame the discussion around geopolitical and strategic divergences that form the very foundations of nuclear policies adopted by both countries. The subsequent reasons shall suffice to establish, on valid grounds, as to why nuclear disarmament for Pakistan cannot be compared to its Indian counterpart.

**9.1 Geopolitical threat perception:** The perceived threat from India is considered the main reason for Pakistan retaining nuclear weapons. Historically, Pakistan has maintained that its nuclear arsenal is necessary to deter conventional military superiority and nuclear capabilities of India. But should India, being a responsible nuclear power, enter into a binding agreement on non-nuclear confrontation, the rationale of retaining nuclear weapons weakens. In such a case, the security concerns of Pakistan can be satisfied without nuclear weapons. That would imply that India, as a signatory to related international agreements in this context, would have legal commitments not to exercise the options of nuclear weapons.

**9.2 What Ails India's Nuclear Policy?** The geopolitical landscape of India is amazingly diverse, and it is due to this that any concept of deterrence would be different when compared to the West. In contrast, India's nuclear policy is driven not just by rivalry with Pakistan, but also by security concerns with other neighbours, especially China. China's nuclear arsenal, combined with ever-growing military capabilities, poses a significant challenge to India's national security. The undermarketed borders and the

Indo-China War of 1962 have left long-lasting scars on India's strategic psyche. So, nuclear disarmament for India is not an issue purely bilaterally with Pakistan but one that involves China jointly—a nuclear power with regional ambitions.

**9.3 Global Nuclear Dynamics:** India's nuclear policy also has been mainly decided by the global nuclear order and, more precisely, the competition between big powers like the United States, Russia, and China. None of them show any signs of pursuing comprehensive disarmament, thus making the international environment quite complex.

**9.4 Pakistan's Reliance on Tactical Nuclear Weapons:** Unlike India, which follows a 'No First Use' doctrine, Pakistan follows 'First Use Policy' (for India). The heavy reliance on nuclear weapons for deterrence makes this much more difficult for Pakistan to contemplate disarmament without explicit and unconditional security guarantees from India and the international community.

**9.5 China-Pakistan Alliance and its Impact on Pakistan's Nuclear Strategy:** China has all along remained a very supportive ally of the Pakistani nuclear program both in strategic and military dimensions. For instance, even if India and Pakistan were to arrive at a certain disarmament formula, China would still remain a nuclear power in the region that India would have to contend with, thus making India's unilateral or one-sided disarmament unwise. Moreover, the involvement of China further complicates Pakistan's own nuclear disarmament; with Chinese support, Pakistan may feel emboldened to hang on to its nuclear capability despite the agreement to the contrary with India.

**9.6 Strategic Autonomy and Non-Alignment:** India's nuclear policy is considerably encouraged by its greater strategic culture of autonomy and non-alignment.

**9.7 Multilateral Disarmament and India's Position:** India has conventionally supported global nuclear disarmament through multilateral forums. However, India also maintained that disarmament to be pan-national has to be comprehensive and universal. India is unlikely to dismantle its nuclear arsenal unless there is a global movement towards disarmament to which all nuclear powers are a party. The failure of these major powers to pursue significant disarmament initiatives underlines the reason why India cannot disarm unilaterally or bilaterally with Pakistan alone.

## 10. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, while nuclear disarmament for Pakistan may seem feasible if a robust non-nuclear confrontation agreement is reached with India, the complexities surrounding India's nuclear strategy make the issue far more intricate. India's security concerns are not limited to Pakistan but extend to its broader geopolitical environment, particularly China's nuclear capabilities and global nuclear power dynamics. Furthermore, India's commitment to strategic autonomy and the failure of major global powers to pursue comprehensive disarmament hinder unilateral action. Until multilateral efforts involving all nuclear states are realized, nuclear disarmament for India remains an unlikely prospect.

