

# Clausewitz's Trinity of War and Nuclear Deterrence

## The Case of Indian Nuclear Deterrence and Strategic Stability in South Asia

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### Abstract

This article reiterates the relevance of Clausewitz to India's nuclear deterrence, which is supported by New Delhi's "trinity of war" aggregates of constitutional democracy, economic strength, technological advancement, diplomatic engagement, military buildup, and nationalistic cultural ambitions. These aggregates impart substance and credibility to India's nuclear doctrine and force posture, making India's position more confident and reliable in comparison to Pakistan's deterrent. This dynamic could undermine strategic stability in South Asia by incentivizing India to contemplate counterforce options against Pakistan.

### Introduction

The realist theory of classical nuclear deterrence seems to be widely popular in the South Asian strategic community.<sup>1</sup> There seems to be scant realization that the classical theory of nuclear deterrence has its imperfections, especially in the South Asian context where weapon numbers, delivery systems, and technological capabilities are celebrated.<sup>2</sup> More nuanced perspectives on nuclear deterrence that emphasize chance, irrationality and credibility seem to attract less than required attention in the South Asian environment.<sup>3</sup>

Undue emphasis on nuclear capabilities alone could tend to blur the perennial linkages of a nation's war-making and war-avoidance capabilities with the quality of society, political system, economy, diplomacy, and technological prowess. Nuclear deterrence, like any other aspect of war-making or war-avoidance capability of a nation-state is developed and employed as part of the "strange trinity of war" as espoused by Clausewitz.<sup>4</sup> His theory of war and the conception of trinity remain applicable to nuclear deterrence as well.<sup>5</sup>

This implies that the Indian nuclear deterrence is not only affected by the nuclear capability, but also by other elements of the trinity: the emotions of Indian people; quality of Indian government and polity; strength of economy; as well as advanced technology and preparedness of its military forces. In this context, this

paper argues that Indian nuclear deterrence is supported by its trinity of war aggregates. These aggregates impart substance and credibility to India's nuclear doctrine and force posture, making it more confident and reliable in comparison to Pakistan's deterrent. This dynamic could undermine strategic stability in South Asia by incentivizing India to contemplate counterforce options against Pakistan.

### **Clausewitz's Trinity and Nuclear Deterrence**

As Donna Uthus has aptly observed, "We can hardly speak about nuclear deterrence without invoking Carl von Clausewitz." And it is remarkable to see the list of Clausewitz's admirers that include pioneering nuclear strategists and contemporary analysts alike.<sup>6</sup> Postwar strategists and scholars strongly admiring Clausewitz have included Bernard Brodie, Herman Kahn, Robert Osgood, Raymond Aron (French), Tom Schelling, Henry Kissinger, and Michael Howard (British). Clausewitz's followers have been influential largely in articulating a political philosophy of deterrence, which has had wide influence on international relations theory.

According to Clausewitz, war is a strange trinity of propensities. First being that the "essential nature" of war is violence imbedded in human psyche as impulses of hate and enmity. The uncertain, unquantifiable, and unexpected nature of war is the second strand. Whereas, the third strand of the trinity envisages war as "a political tool" where it becomes "the province of pure intelligence."<sup>7</sup> Nuclear deterrence is the relationship between two nuclear armed states that is based on possession of nuclear weapons along with delivery means; the will/resolve to deliver; and cognizance by each adversary that the other would actually deliver the nuclear weapons.<sup>8</sup> Strategic stability rests on the stability of nuclear deterrence and implies that because of the mutual vulnerability of strategic forces on each side, neither side would feel compelled to initiate a nuclear first strike. Such a dynamic is based on the shared assumption that showing restraint—even in a crisis—would be far more advantageous than striking first.<sup>9</sup>

Clausewitz's conception of trinity suggests that nuclear deterrence depends not merely on the size, sophistication and destructiveness of nuclear weapons and their delivery means, rather nuclear deterrence also depends on the quality of society, economy, and government.<sup>10</sup> Nuclear deterrence must have political objective to achieve. As instrument of policy, war is prosecuted to achieve a better state of peace for the society; and it must not be waged to put the existence of the society in peril.<sup>11</sup> Nuclear deterrence, like war in general, is not an independent phenomenon in its own right; neither does it have a rationale of its own.<sup>12</sup> Nuclear weapons may be the "absolute weapons," but they are not the absolute guarantee of national security and survival, if they were not interwoven into the trinity of

war. Strategic stability, nuclear deterrence, nuclear doctrine, and posture—all are firmly imbedded in the trinity of war.<sup>13</sup> The interrelations among various elements of the trinity and the phenomenon of nuclear deterrence are complex and complicated.<sup>14</sup> That is why American military strategist Bernard Brodie had cautioned against looking at nuclear deterrence in easy to understand paradigms.<sup>15</sup> In this regard, the objective of deterrence in the sense of avoidance of war needs to be understood in the same context. While commenting on the “deep structures” of the Cold War, E. P. Thompson observed in the 1980s, “Deterrence has repressed the export of violence toward the opposing bloc, but in doing so the repressed power of the state has turned back upon its own author. The repressed violence has backed up and worked its way into the economy, the polity, the ideology, and the culture of the opposing powers.”<sup>16</sup> Decades later, it is now clearer that nuclear deterrence has a complicated nature that is intricately linked with a nation’s political, economic, diplomatic, technological, and emotional-cultural domains—called trinity of war aggregates for the purposes of this study.

### **Indian Trinity of War Aggregates**

India, with 1.3 billion peoples, is the 2nd-most populous country in the world. Slightly more than one-third the size of the United States, India is the 8th-largest country by area—land frontiers run across 9,300 miles (15,000 km) and coastline stretches more than 4,670 miles (7,516 km)—and India is the world’s largest democracy.<sup>17</sup>

India is an economy of an estimated 2.7 trillion USD—sixth-largest in real terms and third-largest in terms of purchasing power parity, after China and the United States—and the government aspires India to be a 5 trillion USD economy in the next few years.<sup>18</sup> India’s defense, nuclear, and space programs have received adequate budgetary support from the successive governments in power, enabling the related research and development organizations to implement their plans and achieve most of their targets. India’s “Vision for Decade” announced by the Finance Minister in her 2019–2020 budget speech, highlights 10 priority areas for development. They include: infrastructure; healthy society; greener India; water management; medical equipment manufacture; digital India; electronics; defense manufacturing; and space and satellite programs.<sup>19</sup>

India has been aspiring to be a great power since its independence in 1947.<sup>20</sup> The *Joint Doctrine of Indian Armed Forces* (JDIAF) of April 2017 claims, “The size of our Nation, our continental relevance as well as our strategic location at the “head and heart” of the Indian Ocean gives us tremendous leverage to preserve peace, promote stability, and maintain security.”<sup>21</sup>

India's great-power ambition has been acknowledged as a motivation to attain nuclear weapons capability.<sup>22</sup> The Indian ruling elite have maintained that "we do want nuclear weapons because we are a great power and we need them to protect ourselves from the Chinese and Pakistani threats."<sup>23</sup>

At the international level, India's democratic credentials and its diplomatic and cultural outreach have enhanced India's prestige, having partly formed the basis for Indo-US Civil Nuclear Agreement of October 2008, and other strategic partnerships. The joint statement issued after then-US President George W. Bush's visit to India in March 2006 states, "Both our countries are linked by a deep commitment to freedom and democracy; a celebration of national diversity, human creativity and innovation; a quest to expand prosperity and economic opportunity worldwide."<sup>24</sup> Fourteen years later, the opening of the Joint Statement titled "Vision and Principles for the United States-India Comprehensive Global Strategic Partnership" on conclusion of then-US President Trump's visit to India reiterate the same sentiments.<sup>25</sup>

Other than the United States, India has signed strategic partnerships and nuclear cooperation agreements with Canada, France, Japan, Kazakhstan, Mongolia, Namibia, Russia, South Korea, and the United Kingdom. Of mention, in 2014 India and Australia signed a nuclear cooperation agreement under which India would be able to procure Australian uranium for its civilian nuclear reactors.<sup>26</sup> Additionally, India has developed strategic cooperation with Israel and Russia in space technology, ballistic missile defense (BMD) systems and missiles. Indo-Russian strategic cooperation is exemplified in the joint development of BrahMos cruise missile, nuclear submarines, and S-400 air defense system.<sup>27</sup>

Inclusion of India in the three principal, multilateral export control regimes has enhanced its prestige as a responsible nuclear state and has bolstered its strategic importance. India joined the Missile Technology Control Regime in 2016 and has participated in the Wassenaar Arrangement, implementing export controls on conventional arms and dual-use goods and technologies, as its 42nd member state since December 2017.<sup>28</sup> On 19 January 2018 India became the 43rd member of the Australia Group, which is a multilateral export control regime for chemical and biological weapons technologies.<sup>29</sup>

India's population is young, multiethnic, and multireligious and is laden with great opportunities as well as attendant challenges. India has registered improvement in its per capita income and literacy rates in the past decade; although the challenges remain in other areas of human resource development.<sup>30</sup> Indian diaspora is one of the largest in the world, and is contributing to India's wealth and social investment abroad.<sup>31</sup> Indian citizens' attitudes on national security reflect concerns about security of their homeland, according to a Pew survey.<sup>32</sup> An esti-

mated 88 percent of Indians consider terrorism to be a big security issue, and an estimated 66 percent believe that the indigenous Naxalite movement is “a very serious threat.” The same proportion considers Lashkar-e-Taiba to be a menacing threat to the country. Whereas, an estimated 47 percent of Indians surveyed have rated Pakistan as “the biggest threat.” A scant six percent of Indians have regarded China as a threat to India.

In the trinity of war, the attitudes and perceptions of the people are important. Consequently, the Indian government makes policies and creates conventional and nuclear capabilities to comfort the concerns of their people and boost their trust in India as a safe and secure country.<sup>33</sup> The trinity relationship between the Indian people, their culture, government, economy, strategic partnerships, and military technology serve as the foundation on which the structure of India’s national security and deterrence strategy stands. India is also afflicted with many societal, political, social, and economic challenges such as the lingering issue of Jammu and Kashmir, Naxalite insurgency, rising Hindu nationalism, the recent maltreatment of the Muslim minority, and hegemonic behavior toward the neighbors.<sup>34</sup> These challenges affect Indian trinity aggregates and nuclear deterrence in their own ways; and need serious soul searching by the Indian leadership.

### **Indian Nuclear Doctrine and the Trinity**

In 1999, India announced its Draft Nuclear Doctrine (DND) that outlined the basic contours of Indian nuclear doctrine.<sup>35</sup> In January 2003, India released its official nuclear doctrine that retained the principal aspects of the DND—India would continue with credible minimum deterrence and a ‘no first use’ (NFU) policy and would respond with punitive retaliation should the deterrence fail. India would also maintain “sufficient, survivable and operationally prepared nuclear forces which are capable of shifting from peacetime deployment to fully employable force in the shortest possible time.” The document stressed that “India would show political will to use nuclear forces; and would maintain effective conventional military capabilities to lift threshold for initiation of conventional as well as nuclear war.” The document further asserts that India would build flexible, responsive, and effective nuclear triad; and pledged that India would not use nuclear weapons against any nonnuclear weapon nation.<sup>36</sup>

The doctrine of 2003 is a fairly comprehensive document that manifests India’s national resolve and as part of the trinity aggregates. It reflects supremacy of constitutional-political leadership and reposes confidence in nation’s economy to produce enough fiscal surpluses to support and sustain nuclear deterrence. The Indian strategic community continues to assess and interpret the doctrine. In 2014, for example, the incumbent National Security Advisor (NSA) Ajit K. Doval

said that “India is shifting its posture from credible minimum deterrence to credible deterrence.”<sup>37</sup> In 2015, however, former Strategic Forces Commander Lt Gen B. S. Nagal suggested that NFU doctrine should be replaced by doctrine of ambiguity.<sup>38</sup>

The JDIAF of 2017 gives a comprehensive and enduring statement of India’s operational nuclear doctrine. The concepts outlined in the doctrine are so profound that some of them need to be reproduced for the sake of concise understanding:

Conflict will be determined or prevented through a process of credible deterrence, coercive diplomacy and conclusively by punitive destruction, disruption and constraint in a nuclear environment across the Spectrum of Conflict . . . Coercion and Deterrence aim to counter threats to our security by communicating to potential adversaries the consequences of their anticipated action or inaction. . . . Deterrence and Coercion strategies will only succeed if an opponent understands that the threats (or incentives) are credible . . . Space bestows immense force multiplication capability on the Armed Forces, and the dependence on space assets for military operation is rapidly increasing.<sup>39</sup>

JDIAF presents Indian military’s basic principles to achieve the political objectives of deterrence by integrating credible deterrence, coercive diplomacy, conventional punitive actions, space, and cyberspace capabilities into Indian nuclear posture. JDIAF operationalizes the nuclear doctrine and posture as strands of the trinity connected with rationality and intelligence.

Indian former and present National Security Advisors and Strategic Force Commanders should be satisfied to find their concerns addressed by the Joint Doctrine’s conventional and nuclear preemptive orientations. In a 2019 article, General Nagal reiterated his case for preemptive counterforce doctrine.<sup>40</sup> Former NSA Shivshankar Menon, from whom Ajit Doval took over in 2014, in his book *Choices*, observes that “India may conduct a preemptive first strike if the use of Pakistani nuclear arsenal appears imminent. This first strike would decapitate Pakistani arsenal to the effect that its ability to retaliate further is taken out of the equation.” To reinforce Indian retaliatory posture, Menon suggests “that Indian retaliation should not be restricted to civilian targets; it must take out Pakistan’s ability to endanger any Indian cities after Pakistan’s initial salvo.”<sup>41</sup> India’s doctrinal thinking seems to have swayed toward preemptive counterforce option toward Pakistan.

Against China, Indian’s doctrine remains to be “counter value assured retaliation” or an assured second-strike capability.<sup>42</sup> India’s doctrinal choices toward China face an inherent dilemma. China modernizes and enhances its nuclear capabilities to balance the United States’ nuclear deterrent. China’s nuclear bal-



ancing acts are taken to threatening by India, who would adjust its minimum nuclear deterrent accordingly.<sup>43</sup>

Indian adjustment in its deterrent posture against China would make Pakistan feel insecure. This lends itself to a triangular dynamic of nuclear deterrence and the trinity aggregates in South Asia. Pakistan's side of the triangle seems to shrink on account of economic downslide, technological gap, governance problems, and sliding social cohesion. Chinese and Indian sides of the triangle are on the way to elongation, albeit unequally. Simply put, the three nuclear armed nations comprising the triangle have unequal trinities. This implies that deterrence stability is likely to remain stressed in the foreseeable future.

### Indian Nuclear Force Posture

The changing geo-political balance of international politics has helped India in developing an operational triad of nuclear weapon systems.<sup>44</sup> India's sea-based nuclear deterrent; advanced ballistic and cruise missile systems—especially those with multiple independently targetable reentry vehicles (MIRV) capability; state of the art nuclear capable aerial platforms including the ostensible fifth-generation Rafale aircraft; BMD systems including S-400; a formidable array of space-based intelligence surveillance and reconnaissance; as well as navigation and communication satellites, are a corollary of India's democratic, diplomatic, economic, and technological development.

India is estimated to have between 130–140 nuclear warheads—an amount that is expected to increase to around 250 weapons by 2025.<sup>45,46</sup> Its land-based missiles comprise Prithvi, Agni and Shourya series of missiles. The Indian Air Force (IAF) has modified its Mirage 2000, SU-30 and Jaguar aircraft for nuclear strike. The technologically advanced French Rafale aircraft is in the process of induction in the IAF and would be used in nuclear strike role.

India deployed its first nuclear-powered submarine *Arihant* with K-15 Sagarika 750-km range submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBM) in August 2016; and deployed its second nuclear submarine *Arighat* in 2017.<sup>47</sup> In August 2018, *Arihant* test fired three Sagarika K-15 SLBMs while in November that year, Indian Prime Minister Modi announced *Arihant* had completed its first “deterrence patrol,” thus operationalizing India's nuclear triad.<sup>48,49</sup> The nuclear submarines had reportedly sailed off prior to India's airstrike on Balakot, Pakistan, on 26 February 2019; the *Arihant* ought to have carried ready-to-launch SLBMs.<sup>50</sup> This indicates that Indian nuclear submarines, equipped with ready to use SLBMs, have become part of the Indian nuclear force posture and deterrence strategy. Indian warheads and delivery systems had been kept in de-mated state until recently. Recent developments indicate that some of the canisterized ballistic mis-

siles (e.g., Agni–IV intermediate-range ballistic missile) and cruise missiles may actually be in ready to use status. A section of IAF nuclear attack aircraft is believed to be colocated with ready to use air-launched BrahMos supersonic cruise missiles.<sup>51</sup> Consequently, India's ready to use nuclear force components seem to impart preemptive counterforce option. In the same vein, satellite-based command, control, communications, computers, intelligence, information, surveillance, and reconnaissance (C4I2SR) capabilities are also crucial to India's ready to respond nuclear posture.<sup>52</sup>

### **Nuclear Deterrence, Trinity, and Strategic Stability**

India is compelled to follow a “differentiated deterrence” option in the exercise of its nuclear deterrence.<sup>53</sup> Against China, Indian deterrence is stable and rests on the concept of mutual vulnerability and NFU. India–China nuclear deterrence is stable also due to absence of nonstate actors capable of causing deterrence break down between them. Among the average Indians, Pakistan remains the major focus of security concern, while China is less so. Successive Indian governments have sought to engage with China despite the disputed borders and China's role in “propping up Pakistan.”<sup>54</sup> India has pursued diplomatic moves toward China, including the signing of the 2005 Agreement on Political Parameters and Agreed Guidelines of Settling the Border Dispute.<sup>55</sup> In 2017 Indian and Chinese troops were engaged in a tense standoff at Doklam that lasted for 73 days. In late April 2018, Prime Minister Modi and President of China Xi Jinping held an informal summit in the Chinese city of Wuhan, where the two agreed to “respect each other's sensitivities, concerns and aspirations” and maintain peace and tranquility along their common but un-demarcated frontiers.<sup>56</sup> The informal Wuhan summit sows that instability at a lower level actually caused stability at a higher level of deterrence between the two countries. This factor is reinforced by the ongoing drawdown of the Chinese forces from Ladakh, a territory within the disputed Kashmir region, following a prolonged and violent faceoff. This reflects that an adequate level of strategic stability exists between India and China despite border issues and strategic competition.<sup>57</sup>

India's strategic competition with China fuels Indo–Pakistan deterrence relationship. India's bid to counter China appears threatening, and Pakistan is compelled to balance India's nuclear developments. Such a vicious circle of action–reaction and arms race complicates strategic stability in South Asia. The Indo–Pakistan paradox of stability–instability seems to intensify owing to continued territorial conflict over the Kashmir region, and lack of consultation among leaders of the two countries.<sup>58</sup> India's counterforce capabilities and doctrinal options in its trinity aggregates affect the strategic stability dynamics in a peculiar way.



India's counterforce incentives are likely to exacerbate its own signaling difficulties; make assertive versus delegative control problematic; and enhance its "always-never" dilemma. This might also enhance crises instability, where India might be tempted to launch a hasty nuclear strike; or Pakistan might attempt its first strike option out of pure fear augmented by "use it or lose it" dilemma. Pakistan's anxiety over its lack of geographic depth and difficulties with weapons dispersal and concealment could add to this dilemma.<sup>59</sup> India–Pakistan deterrence stability is also marred by actions of the nonstate actors as demonstrated by Uri and Pulwama incidents.<sup>60</sup> Emboldened by its favorable trinity aggregates, the IAF attack across the international border on 26 February 2019 has demonstrated that India would need to act with more maturity expected from a stronger nuclear power that is vying for a great-power status.

### **Implications for South Asia**

There is little doubt that India has been able to create a better aggregate of the trinity of war that supports and sustains its nuclear deterrence. India appears to be more secure than it has ever been in its recent history. This is despite having a recent share of governance dysfunctions, societal fissures, political exclusion, and rising poverty levels. These factors challenge the quality of Indian deterrence and war-making capabilities in their own right. Despite these challenges, India is likely to bolster its democratic disposition, social, economic, educational, and technological development. As this study has shown, India has intensely engaged with international community at political, diplomatic, cultural, economic, technological, and strategic levels. Resultantly, India has grown stronger in the region and, paradoxically, she has also exacerbated the vulnerabilities of the region.<sup>61</sup> India's unilateral change of status quo on Kashmir, its aggressive air strike on Pakistani territory, military standoff with China, and uneasy relations with Nepal and Myanmar have the potential to destabilize the region and present it with nuclear dangers.

As India's nuclear rival, Pakistan would be well-advised to strengthen its aggregates of the trinity. Emphasis on political stability, social development, economic revival, and diplomatic engagement seems urgent and inescapable.<sup>62</sup> Pakistan needs to stabilize its society, reinvigorate its economy, and have effective representative government. Pakistan must curb the ability of nonstate actors to organize on its soil. At the strategic level, over-emphasis on nuclear weapons should be replaced with emphasis on effective command and control system, operationalization of naval leg of the triad, dispersal and concealment of nuclear missile sites and launchers, and acquisition of early warning systems and capabilities. This would ensure country's dignified existence based on measured but

assured second-strike capability in the face of preemptive counterforce threats. Pakistan must make strides in the civilian use of its nuclear, space, and cyberspace technologies.

## **Conclusion**

In line with thinking of Clausewitz, nuclear deterrence is not a stand-alone, self-contained, or independent phenomenon. It is linked with the strange trinity of war. Nuclear deterrence is an instrument of policy and has political objective to achieve. India has been able to build its nuclear deterrence on its democratic credentials, diplomatic and cultural outreach, economic development, and technological and military advancements. India has invested in creating a sizable social capital for itself in the world. She has been able to spare enough fiscal and societal surpluses to support and sustain its nuclear deterrence. Indian nuclear deterrence is politically responsible, technologically intensive, and draws heavily on cooperative diplomatic and international efforts. Indian deterrence is aided by sophisticated space, cyberspace and information technologies and state of the art military systems. Accordingly, India maintains a stable deterrence relationship with China that is based on NFU, mutual vulnerability and assured second-strike capability. In the case of Pakistan, Indian doctrinal thinking has swayed toward proactive operations and counterforce options. This is because Indian nuclear deterrence against Pakistan is supported by stronger aggregates of the trinity. Such a dynamic, however, may accentuate India's own nuclear dilemmas and paradoxes, and exacerbate Pakistan's fears and use it or lose it dilemma. This does not auger well for strategic stability of the region. India would need to be a more mature nuclear power, so that its trinity of war aggregates do not cause its to destabilize the strategic stability. At the same time, Pakistan should build its trinity of war aggregates; focus on building a cohesive nation; stabilize its internal environment and society; and reinvigorate its economy, governance, and international engagement. Possession of nuclear weapons means little if other strands of the trinity are not equally developed to achieve an effective nuclear deterrence. ✪

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## Notes

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