


Chapter 16

India's Naval Nuclearization and Pakistan's Strategic Response: Implications for South Asian Stability

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ABSTRACT

India's naval nuclearization, particularly through Arihant-class ballistic missile submarines (SSBNs), has fundamentally altered South Asia's strategic landscape. This development disrupts traditional land-based deterrence equilibrium, compelling Pakistan to recalibrate its maritime defense posture despite fiscal and technological constraints. The chapter examines how India's sea-based nuclear capabilities exacerbate regional security dilemmas, increase crisis escalation risks, and complicate command-and-control architectures. Pakistan's response options include developing asymmetric deterrence through submarine-launched cruise missiles, implementing

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Anti-Access/Area Denial strategies, and strengthening naval partnerships with China. Naval nuclearization threatens regional stability through heightened miscalculation risks in opaque maritime environments while challenging global non-proliferation norms. Sustainable deterrence requires multidimensional responses combining selective modernization, doctrinal adaptation, and proactive diplomacy to prevent an unmanageable arms race.

1. INTRODUCTION

South Asia's strategic landscape is characterized by persistent instability rooted in territorial disputes and historical grievances. The India-Pakistan rivalry, particularly over Kashmir, has resulted in multiple wars and continues to shape regional security dynamics (Wueger, 2024). The 1971 conflict, which led to the creation of Bangladesh, exemplifies how Indian military intervention transformed a political dispute between East and West Pakistan into an armed conflict. Many Pakistani strategists argue that nuclear deterrence would have prevented India's intervention in East Pakistan (Zulqarnain et al., 2024). These historical episodes underscore the prevalence of security dilemma dynamics in South Asian geopolitics, where efforts by one state to enhance its security invariably heighten the insecurity of its adversary. Uncertainty about intentions compounds this dilemma, as demonstrated when India capitalized on Pakistan's vulnerability in 1971.

This study addresses three critical questions that animate contemporary strategic discourse: (i) Can Pakistan's traditionally land-centric nuclear posture evolve to credibly deter India's emerging sea-based capabilities without triggering fiscal exhaustion or strategic overreach? (ii) How does the opacity inherent in submarine operations heighten miscalculation risks during confrontations, such as naval blockades or Balakot-type crises? and (iii) What consequences does the unchecked proliferation of naval nuclear weapons hold for global non-proliferation regimes and South Asia's fragile deterrence architecture?

To address these questions, the chapter proceeds as follows. Section 2 establishes the theoretical framework rooted in security dilemma theory and examines the regional security context. Section 3 traces the evolution and strategic motivations behind India's naval nuclear capabilities, including SSBN development and sea-based missile systems. Section 4 analyzes Pakistan's strategic vulnerabilities in the maritime domain and existing naval posture. Section 5 evaluates the strategic implications of India's naval nuclearization for Pakistan across military, economic, and diplomatic dimensions. Section 6 outlines Pakistan's strategic response options, including asymmetric deterrence, A2/AD strategies, and naval diplomacy. Section 7 assesses broader implications for regional stability and the global security archi-

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